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## The psychological stages of unemployment

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## The psychological stages of unemployment

### Abstract

The psychological impact of unemployment has been the subject of extensive research. Unemployment has been linked to lowered self-esteem (Branthwaite and Garcia, 1985; Shamir, 1986), boredom (Kirkpatrick and Trew, 1985; Kirchler, 1985), depression (Halford and Learner, 1984; Winefield and Tiggemann, 1985), alienation (Davies and Esseveld, 1985; Halford and Learner, 1984; Hill, 1978), and suicide (Sherraden, 1985).

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL STAGES  
OF UNEMPLOYMENT

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by  
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The psychological impact of unemployment has been the subject of extensive research. Unemployment has been linked to lowered self-esteem (Branthwaite and Garcia, 1985; Shamir, 1986), boredom (Kirkpatrick and Trew, 1985; Kirchler, 1985), depression (Halford and Learner, 1984; Winefield and Tiggemann, 1985), alienation (Davies and Esseveld, 1985; Halford and Learner, 1984; Hill, 1978), and suicide (Sherraden, 1985).

Recent research (Davies, 1985; Hill, 1978; Kirchler, 1984; Levine, 1982) has shown that the psychological impact appears to progress in three stages. The first is optimism during which individuals experience a sense of freedom and are confident of finding a job. Second, when their efforts fail, the unemployed can become pessimistic, angry, depressed, bored, or lonely. The incidence of family conflict is common in this stage. Finally, individuals resign themselves to their new state and become fatalistic and indifferent.

Understanding these stages and their components is of special importance to professionals working directly with the unemployed and their families. The stages may be used as guidelines to predict behavior, increase awareness and understanding, and provide much needed support.

#### Stage One: Optimism

The first stage of unemployment lasts a few weeks to two or more months. It begins with shock which is quickly replaced

by optimism. For some, the initial shock was traumatic. Platt and Kreitman (1985) found that the attempted suicide rate in the first four weeks of unemployment is nine times greater than that of the employed. Hill (1978) reports a traumatic reaction is associated with the loss of long-term employment. More often, however, the initial shock is mixed with denial. Individuals feel job loss to be a temporary stage in their life and there is no need for help. They feel nothing has really changed (Davies, 1985; Hill, 1978; and Levine, 1982).

Optimism sets in as the shock lifts. Davies (1985) and Levine (1982) believe the unemployed are filled with hope as they begin the search for a job. Optimistically, they believe it will be fairly easy to find a new job (Davies, 1985; Kirchler, 1984). During this optimistic phase the attempted suicide rate declines. Their emotional state is good (Platt and Kreitman, 1985). Occupational identity and status continue to be closely tied to their former job and, because of this, their self-esteem usually remains the same (Breakwell, 1985). Davies (1985) and Hill (1978) report individuals feel a sense of freedom. They now have time to do projects they have not had time to do before. They treat unemployment like vacation. Oftentimes they are happy at their loss of job. They recall the bad qualities of their former job and believe their new job will be much better (Hill, 1978).

### Stage Two: Pessimism

As savings run low and the early attempts at finding a job are unsuccessful, laid-off workers progress to stage two. This stage, according to Hill (1978) is the most crucial for intervention, because it is when negative effects are most profound and before the almost unreachable state of indifference has been attained. The dominant psychological states are pessimism and hopelessness. Other responses are anger, feelings of inferiority, loneliness, boredom, and depression (Davies, 1985; Hill, 1978).

As the search for a job proves fruitless and the length of unemployment increases the unemployed grow despondent. Kirchler (1985) believes the unemployed are not satisfying their needs for prestige, power, or confidence. This leaves them with feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness. Winefield and Tiggemann (1985) believe women report deeper levels of depression and powerlessness than men. Platt and Kreitman (1985) found that suicide attempts increase during this stage of depression and pessimism. It is at this time that the unemployed begins a downward spiral as their self-esteem deteriorates, their perceptions of their ability to control their situation decrease, and their depression worsens (Halfor and Learner, 1984).

The status and occupational identity of these individuals begins to change. They begin to think of themselves, not in relation to their former job, but as unemployed. These individuals

were found by Davies (1985) and Shamir (1986) to accept the status that society has attached to the condition of unemployment. This status is a negative one, often associated with laziness and degradation.

Although they accept their status they are sensitive to it. Branthwaite (1985) and Breakwell (1985) both discovered that the unemployed react defensively when criticized or insulted. However, the form their response takes is less one of indignation and more one of accepting the rights of others to criticize them, but wishing they would not.

The stigma of being unemployed, one of worthlessness and laziness, are present in all of the individuals at this stage. The degree of the stigma is related to the amount of unemployment in the region. In areas of high unemployment the stigma is not as severe as in areas of low unemployment. With others to share their status, it did not seem to have as negative an impact to their self-esteem (Platt and Kreitman, 1985; Ullah, Banks and Warr, 1985).

Loneliness is another psychological effect at this phase. During their employment, friendships and social life frequently involve fellow employees. Early in unemployment attempts are made to continue contacts. By the pessimistic stage these contacts have often stopped. Breakwell (1985) reports individuals with deep feelings of loneliness. Ullah, Banks and Warr (1985) associate



loss of weekday contact with peers and feelings of loneliness with feelings of depression.

This loneliness is reflected in leisure activities. During early unemployment people spend leisure time with friends (Bartell and Bartell, 1985). After a few months out of work, activities become increasingly more isolated. Activities such as walking, watching television, listening to music, and lying around thinking increase significantly (Halford and Learner, 1984; Hill, 1978).

Boredom is a common complaint (Davies and Esseveld, 1985; Halford and Learner, 1984; Hill, 1978; Sherraden and Adamek, 1985). One of the latent benefits of work is the structure of time. In the first stage of unemployment, loss of structure is not problematic because time is used constructively in job searches and projects around the home. Once these projects have been completed and job searches have been fruitless, loss of structure becomes an issue. The unemployed feel a sense of inertia, disinclined to exert effort. They sleep late because there is no reason to get up, with time on their hands and nothing to do (Hill, 1978). The unemployed feel lazy, bored and unstimulated.

Attempts at structuring time are met with varying degrees of success. Structuring around housework gives them things to do but does not alleviate their boredom. Because society does not value housework as highly as paid work, these individuals

do not experience a sense of accomplishment or worthiness (Kilpatrick and Trew, 1985). In fact, some men see it as a blow to their male ego to do traditional women's work as their wives supersede them as the breadwinner.

Although hobbies do increase enjoyment and stimulation, they do not offer the identity or sense of worth provided by paid work (Davies and Esseveld, 1985). Breakwell (1985) notes that individuals who structure their time around voluntary work are the most successful in alleviating boredom and gaining a sense of worth. However, few of these attempts give the unemployed the sense of accomplishment and worth that paid work had previously provided.

Another response during this stage is anger. The anger felt by the unemployed is directed at themselves or at others. There is a tendency to condemn themselves for the loss of their job. They claim they are not smart enough or skilled enough to keep their job (Breakwell, 1985). They reproach themselves for their uselessness (Davies, 1985) and laziness (Layton and Eysenck, 1985). Winefield and Tiggeman (1985) indicate women reproached themselves more than men.

When anger is directed externally people close to them or society in general are often the targets. Kirchler (1984) found that the unemployed often attribute bad feelings to their families, which easily leads to conflicts. In fact, conflicts, family

violence, separation and divorce increase during unemployment, apparently due in a large part to increased stress and anger (Shelton, 1985). The unemployed are angry and bitter at society for failing to help them find a job and are resentful of society's negative opinion of them (Branthwaite and Garcia, 1985; Davies, 1985).

### Stage Three: Apathy

After about nine months of unemployment changes begin to happen. As people accept their situation and settle into it, they become apathetic and fatalistic. They give up hope, believe they will be unable to find a job, and withdraw and isolate themselves from others (Hill, 1978; Levine, 1982).

The self-esteem of the unemployed deteriorates in the first months of unemployment. They have to contend with self-approach, society's low opinion of them, poverty, and rejection. In this stage their self image is different from one they had while employed. They feel worthless (Davies and Esseveld, 1985). They report to Ullah, Banks and Warr (1985) that they would find jobs if only they were different, more outgoing, more skilled, more educated. According to Davies (1985), the unemployed are similar to retired people in the experience of being ignored and not respected. This, and the rejections of their job applications, have led them to accept the inescapability of their situation. Because they have given up hope, job searches lessen or stop

completely. The longer they are unemployed the less chance they have of ever becoming employed again (Hill, 1978).

The act of becoming indifferent is a defensive one. With the onset of this attitude, anxiety, depression, and struggle are lifted. They stop worrying because they believe there is nothing they can do about their situation. This is less stressful than continuous feelings of anxiety (Hill, 1978).

Attempted suicide is 19 times higher after a year of unemployment than for the employed (Platt and Kreitmann, 1985). This raises the question, if depression has declined why suicide? The answer, for Platt and Kreitmann (1985), is fatalism. Feelings of lack of control and lack of interest provide the unemployed with no reason to continue living.

The apathy that people feel at this time results in withdrawal from others. Lack of money often precludes activities with others and they do not care enough to make the effort of seeing their friends in less expensive ways. In addition, they feel others do not care enough to make the effort to contact them (Davies, 1985; Hill, 1978). The unemployed, in a study by Levine (1982), describe feelings of alienation. They do not think others want to understand them and they feel shunned. They report that they want to be left alone. It is more comfortable than trying to talk to people who seem to be superior to them. Branthwaite

and Garcia (1985) found that reclusivity and alienation are common after a year of unemployment for all personality types.

### Conclusion

The unemployed progress through three stages after they lose their job. The depth and impact of these stages is related to the importance of the job, both financially and psychologically (Shamir, 1986). Beginning with shock, denial, and optimism, they progress through hopelessness, pessimism, and anger, to apathy (Davies, 1985; Kirchler, 1985; Hill, 1978).

The importance of intervention is obvious. Even more so when recognized that these psychological factors are interfering with the best means of resolving them, namely, reemployment (Shelton, 1985). Lessening the effects of unemployment through intervention will improve their quality of life and may increase their chances of reemployment.

Knowledge of these stages can be used in the prevention and treatment of the unemployed. When a business is planning to lay off or close, counselors and other professionals could be called in to help employees become aware of what they will experience and the importance of seeking help.

There appears to be two ways to help people who have become unemployed. These are social support and time structure (Breakwell, 1985; Hsia and Herman, 1985; Ullah, Banks and Warr, 1985).

Breakwell (1985) found that the next best thing to paid work is voluntary work. This provides the benefits of worth and stimulation in addition to routines and time structure. It offers a reason to get out of bed in the morning and something in which they could feel pride. A volunteer job also keeps them exposed to society, lessens their alienation and increases their chances of finding a job.

Ullah, Banks and Warr (1985) found people who view their world as unsupportive are also more distressed. It follows then that increasing support may decrease distress. Support may take many forms. Financial help lessens distress but not as much as social support (Hill, 1978). Other helpful forms of support are cheering up, suggesting things to do, inviting them over, talking about problems, and teaching them ways to cope with unemployment (Ullah, Banks and Warr, 1985). Hsia and Herman (1985) noted the positive effects of including the family in counseling sessions.

Future research needs to be made on the effects of the above suggested interventions. Do the interventions lessen the depth of the psychological effects? Does preventative counseling help? What is the most beneficial form of support? How do different personalities react to different interventions? These are a few of the questions still to be answered.

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