

Ease anxiety over layoffs with a Plan B

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From Wednesday's Globe and Mail, Thursday, Jun. 18, 2009 03:44AM EDT

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Dear Susan,

I'm in high-tech project management and there has been a round of cuts at my company. I doubt my position will last, even though we've been told there won't likely be more layoffs, as I was one of the most recent hires. So I am looking for another position, like everyone else here. My problem is that I feel so anxious about the future that I can hardly concentrate on the work I still have. How do I deal with the psychological uncertainty?

- Dreading the Worst

Dear Dreading,

First, run, don't walk, to your family doctor to make sure you're not depressed. Along with affecting your appetite and sleep, depression can literally hijack your ability to think. Like one of those distorting mirrors in a fun house, the brain chemistry of the illness alters your memory and perceptions - not just whether you see the glass as half-empty but also your ability to stay focused and how well you can retrieve information you always thought was second nature to you.

Before you forget not only your clients' names but your physician's telephone number, too, call for an appointment - preferably one at the end of the day when there's no one else waiting. Get to the point before your time is up: "Doc, I'm worried all the time about my job, waking up hours before my alarm goes off, and starting to lose my mental edge. Do you think it's something that should be treated?"

Imminent job loss, financial stresses or the spectre of scandal are external events, to be sure, but they can trigger a cascade of internal biochemical reactions that can be life-threatening, especially to men. According to a Financial Times report, 80 per cent of the 5.1 million jobs lost in this recession were previously held by men, one factor contributing to a spike of male suicides that have dominated the news of late.

The recent deaths of David Kellermann, chief financial officer of mortgage giant Freddie Mac, and Roh Moo-Hyun, the former president of South Korea, are reminders that high earnings and status provide no protection.

Second, stay engaged at work, with as much interest in current projects as you can muster, with one proviso: Shift your expectation of payoffs from the company to yourself. In short, seek intrinsic rewards.

Why? Research by Simon Fraser University researchers Christopher Zatzick and Roderick Iverson shows that layoffs hit "high-involvement" workplaces much harder than traditional workplaces. Where employees feel personally invested in an organization, layoffs and a sudden about-face in high-involvement work practices eviscerate morale and productivity.

Third, reframe your circumstances: Recast them so that you gain a feeling of control. For example, you might tell yourself that this job, however short-lived, gave you an opportunity to acquire some unique expertise. Now it's time to learn something else.

Or, that any future job loss is a karmic sign pointing to the adoption of Plan B: pursuing a goal you've always had in the back of your mind.

One downsized colleague used her severance pay to launch a charitable venture, while another's pink slip was the catalyst of a new business. Both projects, born of the recession, are giving them a sense of purpose.

I was forcibly reminded of the reframing strategy when a young stranger approached me recently at a public lecture. She introduced herself as an employee of an institution that, a decade ago, had aggressively recruited me - until the eleventh hour, when their interest and offer evaporated just as mysteriously as it had surfaced, much to my displeasure at the time.

This young colt blithely thrust her hand in my direction and blurted out, "After hearing you speak tonight, I thought, 'It sure was a wonderful thing that position never worked out, or you would never have written that book' "

Once I'd rearranged my facial features (their search was supposedly "confidential"), I realized that she was, albeit ham-fistedly, trying to "reframe" the situation for me (some psychologists just can't help themselves).

She clearly has a hopeful, ingenuous temperament. It's a perspective you need to marshal, one nicely summed up in a parable that appeared in the Atlantic, in an article about happiness.

On Christmas Eve, a father puts a fine gold watch in one son's stocking and a pile of manure in his other son's stocking.

The next morning, the first son approaches his father glumly and says, "Dad, I don't know what to do with this new watch. It's so fragile. It could break." The other boy runs to his father's side and says, "Daddy Daddy Santa left me a pony, if only I can just find it"

You, too, have to find the pony. But first, check with your doctor to see if you're up to the task.

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