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Title:

Unemployment Blues: Are We Pre-Programmed To Be Productive?

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Summary:

To feel productive seems to be an inherent human need. We feel good about ourselves when we are contributing -- to our own independence, to our family, to our community. Many of the great discoveries, inventions, and explorations of history were made by individuals born to family wealth who had no need to ever lift a finger to ensure adequate self-support. Yet these individuals wanted to contribute to the world in some way and left their homes, worked through the night, and even died trying to be part of some enterprise.

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Article Body:

Toiling away at our daily grind, we dream of running away to Hawaii or the South Pacific where we can lie on the beach and do absolutely nothing.

Some of us are lucky enough to take a vacation there and temporarily cut ourselves off from the world of responsibilities and demands and worries. We breathe easier, sleep deeper, eat more heartily. It is truly paradise.

It's wonderful because we have a life waiting to be reclaimed when we step off the plane. Our job is waiting for us and we go back to work with renewed energy and zest from our long overdue break.

It is like the first few days of unemployment, that honeymoon period when we find ourselves with extra time on our hands and no reason to get up early or fight the rush hour traffic. But honeymoons are not designed to last forever and it is only when they are over, that reality and the hard work of building a marriage starts.

The obvious stressors of unemployment are widely recognized: financial strains, the drudgery and frequent humiliation of job search, the family disruption, the loss of self-confidence and self-esteem. While none of these can be lightly dismissed, we are going to concentrate for a moment on an area that is often overlooked. It can cause inner turmoil, pain, significantly increase the emotional fallout of layoff, and exacerbate the depression, anxiety, and negative self-view that so often follow.

To feel productive seems to be an inherent human need. We feel good about ourselves when we are contributing -- to our own independence, to our family, to our community. Many of the great discoveries, inventions, and explorations of history were made by individuals born to family wealth who had no need to ever lift a finger to ensure adequate self-support. Yet these individuals wanted to contribute to the world in some way and left their homes, worked through the night, and even died trying to be part of some enterprise.

Those who sat back on their laurels, and never found any venture to engage them, lead empty lives, drifting through their days without personal value or commitment. Today we see their empty faces in the society pages and read the tabloids to hear about their drug problems and their tawdry efforts to find excitement and meaning.

Those of us - most of us - who have no choice but to work, dream of having enough money to have a choice. Few of us really want to drift around the world without goals or ambition. We simply want to do something meaningful to us rather than the career we fell into which has long since lost its charm and excitement.

It is when that career, boring and humdrum though it may be, is suddenly taken away, that we realize how much of ourselves is invested in the role we have worn for so long. Our belief in our own value is tied up and interdependent with our productivity. We feel a vital part of our marital partnership, someone our children respect and follow, an important person in our community who has earned the right to voice an opinion or vote for a principle. We bear ourselves with a certain pride in that we are bonafide members of the working class and clearly differentiate ourselves from those who fail to contribute: the welfare class, the criminals, the idle rich, the various parasites who dot the fringes of our society.

When we lose our job, the lines start to blur. Our sense of personal importance starts slowly to fracture. We see the reflection of ourselves in the eyes of our friends and family start to change. While we concentrate on finding other work and jumping through the multiple hoops required by any job search campaign, we also withdraw more and more into ourselves, seeking to escape the new image of ourselves emerging in the minds of those around us.

As a vocational counselor, I heard a repeated litany of concerns from spouses and family: "Since this happened, she's totally changed . . . He's not the man I knew . . . I don't know who she is anymore . . . he won't talk to me about what's bothering him . . . I want my husband back. I don't care if he's working or not . . ."

Have you, or someone you love, fallen into this trap?

Address the problem now, before a situation not of your choice and for which you bear no blame, mushrooms into the too frequent personal devastation of the unemployed - broken marriages, family dispersion, substance abuse, shattered lives.

The discomfort and emotional pain of losing your job also provides an opportunity to cement bonds and build strength if you take action to address problems head on. Above all, communication must not lapse. In fact, it needs to be expanded and enriched. Reach out to family and friends, those who love you as you are, "warts and all" as the saying goes.

Express your fears and your worries. Let them know how uncomfortable you are and how disappointed you feel that you cannot contribute to the family in the way you always managed in the past. Seek out ways to be a productive, even if non-working, member of the team. Take on new chores and responsibilities around the house and with the kids. Pay extra attention to your spouse. You may not be able to afford presents or a night on the town, but you can give of your time and your appreciation, gifts more valuable than anything you could buy at a store.

Share the rigors and discouragement of your job hunting efforts. Those who love you want to share in your failures as well as your successes. Encourage them to share their own feelings and fears about your plight, and express their anxieties about the future. Not only do we tend not to express our deepest fears, we also tend not to consciously formulate and define them. They just sit at the back of our minds as a faceless, nagging worry. When we fail to bring them out into the open, where they can be clearly defined and therefore contained, we live in a constant state of unease. To comfort ourselves, we look for something or someone to blame: "Everything was fine until she lost her job . . . if he hadn't got laid off, I'd be registering for college this year . . ." It is an easy slide from such vague thoughts to full-fledged blame and you become the scapegoat on which all problems can be hung.

If you are newly unemployed, take steps now to ensure that such a direction is avoided. If you have been out of work for a considerable period of time, and may have already seen this pattern develop, take the time to stop it in its tracks. Redirect your energies into developing a positive team spirit in which all can have a voice and a contribution. It can turn the destructive nature of unemployment into a lightning rod of family cohesion, strength, and deepened affection.