

Career Planning

How to Bounce Back After Getting Laid Off

by Rebecca Knight

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Losing your job is hard. It dents your self-esteem; it's tough on your bank account; and if you're not smart about your next steps, it can derail your career. Aside from getting back on the horse and looking for a new job, what else should you do to get back on track? How do you maintain your self-confidence? Who should you talk to about the situation? And how should you frame the layoff to future employers?

What the Experts Say

Getting laid off is perhaps the most professionally traumatic experience you'll ever have. "The old adage that it's not about you is nonsense," says John Lees, the UK-based career strategist and the author of *How to Get a Job You Love*. "It's a rejection — the company is saying, 'We don't need you. We can manage without you.' It feels personal." While it's natural to feel this way, you mustn't lose perspective. All in all, "getting laid off is a manageable setback on the scale of human experience," Lees says. And it can even lead to something positive. "Try to think about it as an opportunity that's ultimately going to do you some good," says Priscilla Claman, the president of Career Strategies, a Boston-based consulting firm and a contributor to the *HBR Guide to Getting the Right Job*. "A lot of people stay in their jobs for too long; they get stuck and can't move on." A layoff gives you a fresh start. Here are other ways to bounce back from this difficult and often stressful situation.

Take a hiatus

In the immediate aftermath of a job loss, give yourself time to decompress by "taking a vacation of sorts," suggests Claman. "You don't need to go to Aruba, but take a break," even if it's just for a weekend or a few days, she says. Your goal is get out of your own head with a fun and "active hiatus." Go hiking. Go camping. Go kayaking. "The first phase is recovery," says Lees. Don't make any big decisions in those first few days and don't rush into the job market the day after you've received the news. You need time to process what happened and "how you feel about it."

Do a financial assessment

Getting a handle on where you stand financially after a lay off is critical to keeping your stress and anxiety in check. Claman recommends doing an assessment that details your household budget in the context of your severance and any other unemployment benefits. "Figure out how long you have to look for a job — and give yourself as much time as possible to do so," says Claman. "Also look at what you spend money on and think about ways you can cut back."

This shouldn't be a solo endeavor, she says. "Involve your immediate family members and anyone else who's financially reliant on you. You all need to understand the reality."

Talk it out

When your emotions are still raw, you may feel a lot of "anger and resentment," says Lees. That's natural and it's important to talk about those feelings. But share that story only with trusted friends and "people with whom you don't need a script and who have no agenda," he says. Tell it as many times as you need in order to resolve any "emotional baggage" and get it out of your system before you get in front of a recruiter. They will sense your bitterness, and it won't reflect well on you, says Lees. "They will think: 'Here is someone who's been beaten up.'" Another danger of reaching out to recruiters before you're psychologically ready is that you'll be less likely to weather small setbacks such as not having your phone call or email returned. So before you make that call, Lees recommends asking your trusted circle for objective feedback on your job market-readiness. "Ask, 'Do you think I've come to terms with the situation? Am I ready to go in front of a recruiter?'"

Frame your layoff

Once you've moved past your initial layoff story, work on crafting a simple explanation for your layoff that you can share with professional contacts and potential hiring managers, suggests Lees. Develop an "objective, short, and upbeat" message that shows you're "not a victim and you're not stuck." Lees suggests saying something like: "My former company went through an extensive restructuring. I've been given an opportunity to rethink my career, and what I am looking for now is XYZ." "It's a strong technique that moves you from past to present to future in only a couple of sentences," says Lees. And remember, redundancies and layoffs are "frequent occurrences" in today's employment market, says Claman. "Everyone knows that it happens, and it's acceptable."

Surround yourself with positivity

As you begin to think about what your future may hold, it's common to "feel flat and slightly depressed about your job prospects," says Lees. The remedy is to surround yourself with "positive-minded people who will encourage you and help you move forward." This group — comprised of mentors, former colleagues, and other professional connections—will help you catalog your strengths, remind you of your past accomplishments and achievements, and give you good ideas about what to do next. Family and friends play an important role here, too, adds Claman. "Explain to people that they will need to cut you some slack," she says. "Say, 'I'm going to need your help, your cheerleading, and your support.'"

Explore opportunities

Before you make any networking calls or answer job ads on Monster or Indeed, you need to get yourself together, says Claman. "Make sure your social media profile is up and running and [if applicable to your industry] that you have work samples in order," she says. Then think about your job search in the broadest terms possible. Reach out to former colleagues and friends who work for organizations that interest you. "Talk to those people and get up-to-date on the latest issues and the new buzzwords. Think about headhunters you know. See if it's worth becoming a member of a professional association," she says. Lees recommends you network "with an exploratory mindset." Your goal is to find out what's going on in a given sector and organization and "learn what success looks like" in it, he says. Use what you glean from these conversations to rework your resume. The "language people use to describe success" should be reflected in "your LinkedIn profile," he adds.

Sustain momentum

A job search requires incredible dedication. "It's a volume game," says Claman. "You need to have a lot of activity going on in order to get ahead, and if you get one callback for every 20 resumes you send out, you're doing very well." Don't lose focus, she cautions. "The temptation when you get an interview or callback is to stop all other activities," she says. "But if you don't get the job, you have to go back

to square one” and it can crush your confidence. In other words, even if you feel you’re getting close to a job, make sure you have other irons in the fire. One way to sustain momentum is to populate your calendar with professional meetings and networking events. “At least once a week, you need to put on smart clothes and take someone out for a business lunch,” says Lees. It will be a “positive, reinforcing experience for you.”

Tend to your wellbeing

The old cliché that looking for a job is a fulltime job holds some weight, “but try not to get obsessed by it and spend all your time staring at your computer,” says Lees. It’s unhealthy and often unproductive. “Take care of yourself.” Make sure you’re eating well, exercising, and getting plenty of sleep. “You need to keep your spirits up and your energy high,” says Claman. Watch your budget, of course, but don’t deprive yourself of fun. Most importantly, “be kind to yourself. Don’t be your own bad boss,” she says. “Don’t beat yourself up and don’t blame. Speak about yourself with pride.”

Principles to Remember

Do

- Figure out where you stand financially by assessing your household budget in the context of your severance package and unemployment benefits
- Craft a simple, upbeat explanation for your layoff to share with potential employers and contacts
- Surround yourself with positive people to help you move forward

Don’t

- Approach recruiters when you’re still emotionally raw — if you’re unsure of how you might come across, ask a trusted friend
- Rush into the job market — instead, network with an exploratory mindset to uncover your next opportunity

- Neglect your wellbeing — make sure you're eating well, exercising, and getting enough sleep

Case Study #1 Decide how you'll frame your layoff in a positive way

The day after John Denning* lost his job at a mobile technology company outside Boston, he took a long weekend in Maine. He went mountain biking, played golf, and hiked. "It was helpful to be in a different place and to step away from the routine of daily life," he says. While away, John began to "think about next steps and how [the layoff] could be a good thing."

John admits he felt angry about being laid off, but didn't share his frustration with many people. He didn't want to be seen as a victim. "I primarily vented to my wife," he says. "And I moved quickly to frame the story of what happened in a positive way." His story went something like this: "My company was acquired by a private equity firm that had different priorities. The acquisition has given me an opportunity to think about what I want to do next."

John reached out to friends and former colleagues for advice and introductions and remembers that first flurry of networking as "easy and fun." But "sustaining that was hard," he says. "After that initial phase of personal networking to uncover opportunities, I moved into a less interactive phase where I was researching companies and looking at job postings online. Still I made sure I was doing a circuit of drinks, lunches, and calls to keep myself fresh."

After three months, John accepted a job offer. He had spotted the posting online and — through his network of professional contacts — got a personal introduction to the hiring manager. "In retrospect, the entire experience was a good thing for me," he says. "It was the first time in my life that I'd lost a job and it made me savvier. I realized I'm not untouchable. I am more aware about what goes on in companies."

“It was also rewarding,” he says. “It was a reminder for me that I have a lot of generous and supportive people I can lean on.”

Case Study #2 Network with old colleagues to identify opportunities

The first emotion Paul Boyde* experienced after he lost his job at a non-governmental organization in Washington, D.C., was relief. “It didn’t feel good to be laid off, but at the same time, it was liberating to be let go of a job I was ready to move on from,” he says.

The second emotion he felt was worry. Paul’s wife, Susan, was six months pregnant. Susan had a relatively high-paying job, but still Paul felt uneasy. “I created a spreadsheet that looked at all our income and savings against all our monthly outgoings,” he says. “Knowing where we stood — and that we had enough money in the bank — made me feel less stressed about taking my time to find the right opportunity. It also helped to know that we could afford to order takeout and go to the movies every once in a while.”

To figure out what he wanted to do next, Paul emailed former colleagues, bosses, and classmates from graduate school and invited them for coffee or lunch. It was a “twofer,” says Paul, “I caught up with old friends and coworkers and I got to hear about their jobs and organizations.” The experience was also a self-esteem boost: “At a time when my confidence had taken a hit, they reminded me about what I was good at and helped me think about where my skills would be best put to use.”

During one of these meetings, Paul was introduced to the director of an NGO. “The director didn’t have a fulltime job that was quite right for me, but she offered me a consulting project that involved me interviewing the heads of other NGOs in the region,” he says. “It was perfect. I got to do interesting work; I got to network with potential employers; and I was able to make a little money.”

Four months later, Paul landed a new job with one of the directors he interviewed for the project. “I am much happier in this position and the job is more suited to my interests,” he says.

**Names have been changed*

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