

Layoffs: Tips for Those Who Remain

You have survived a layoff: your job is safe, but you have said goodbye to colleagues who lost their positions. Even though you still have your job, you have still suffered a traumatic loss. You may have lost respected colleagues, a sense of security, trust in your organization, or a role that you treasured. In this resource we will outline some reactions you may experience and some tips for how to cope with the complicated emotional landscape when you are an employee that remains after a layoff.

Wide Range of Reactions

The survivors of a layoff often experience a wide variety of reactions. These do not necessarily happen in an orderly fashion. You may feel many emotions in rapid succession or even at the same time. In the days and weeks after a layoff you may notice some of the following reactions:

- **Relief or gratitude.** Particularly in this current pandemic that has affected so many people, you may be relieved that you are still employed and able to financially support yourself/your family.
- **Guilt.** Colleagues who you respect are leaving the organization. Because the impacts of COVID-19 have been so capricious, people are losing jobs through no fault of their own. You may ask yourself, “why them and not me?” and feel guilty for being one of the lucky ones.
- **Sadness.** Colleagues have left the organization. You may be working for a new supervisor or moved to a new team or role. Each of these is a loss and you may be grieving each of these. Because of COVID-19, many of us are already coping with significant sadness as we absorb other losses – changes to our ways of life, faith in institutions, sickness, or death of those we care about.
- **Uncertainty.** Any layoff – and even more so in the context of this pandemic – raises questions about whether there will be more job losses in the future. You may be feeling anxious, fearful, and destabilized as the future is unknown and uncertain.
- **Lack of motivation.** Many survivors of layoffs report feeling a decrease in their motivation and engagement in their work.

Although these reactions may feel strong and confusing at times, it can be helpful to remind yourself that these are reactions that many other people have experienced and that they are likely temporary and for most people will ease over time.

Coping as a Layoff Survivor

There are several healthy coping strategies that you can use while you adjust to the new reality in your workplace.

1. **Give yourself permission to grieve.** You have experienced a loss and it is okay to feel the sadness and pain that may come. Do not dismiss or downplay the feelings.

2. **Reach out to others.** Your colleagues are likely to also be experiencing a wide range of reactions and talking together about how you are doing (and not just about work) can be an important source of support and connection.
3. **Practice general self-care.** Keep doing those things that help you remain resilient by eating healthy foods, drinking enough water, getting some physical activity, and trying to get enough sleep. All of us are making modifications to these resilient practices because of the many changes caused by COVID-19 but do the best that you can under the circumstances.
4. **Identify and use strengths you develop.** Although navigating a layoff and its aftermath is not something that we would choose, it can be an opportunity for growth, creativity, or innovation. This change in your work environment can provide an opportunity to grow professionally. Are there ways you can use these skills or insights to help yourself and others?
5. **Ask for help.** If you find that you are having persistent feelings of sadness, anger or anxiety that are not diminishing over time or are interfering with your ability to conduct your daily activities, please look for support from your Employee Assistance Program/Staff Care Program.

A Special Note for Managers Who Remain

Managers have a unique responsibility and opportunity to support their team members in the aftermath of a layoff. Employees will often pay close attention to their supervisor's words and actions to calibrate their own professional and personal response.

Here are a few suggestions about how managers can help their team members cope and prioritize:

1. **Communicate, communicate, communicate.** In the absence of information from you, employees will create their own story about what happened and what is likely to happen in the future. Share as many details as you can and advocate for transparency from senior leadership. Without consistent and open communication, people's concerns and fears are likely to increase and affect productivity and morale.
2. **Be prepared for strong feelings.** As described above, your team members are likely to experience a wide variety of emotions. Acknowledging these emotions and giving people the opportunity to describe what they are feeling and support each other can help. If you do not feel equipped to hold these kinds of discussions, please seek support from Human Resources or your organization's Employee Assistance Program/Staff Care Program.
3. **Take an honest look at responsibilities and workloads.** Your team members may feel anxious about taking on additional responsibilities. This may be even more true when your employees are likely already juggling other major shifts in their lives including unexpectedly working from home and increased caregiving responsibilities due to the pandemic. Think carefully about taking on new team assignments and which goals can be postponed or set aside. It can be helpful to meet individually with each remaining team member to clarify their role and team objectives.
4. **Create a shared sense of purpose.** Although it may seem counterintuitive, the period after a layoff can be an opportunity to create a greater sense of shared purpose. Most employees want to know that their contributions matter. Directly connecting individual objectives and goals to

the organization's mission and values can help to rebuild trust, generate creativity, and enhance commitment to the organization.

- 5. Take care of yourself.** Being a manager is hard. Being a manager after a layoff is harder. Your team needs you to be resilient. Identify those practices that help you maintain your energy, resiliency and faith in the future and create time for them in your day.