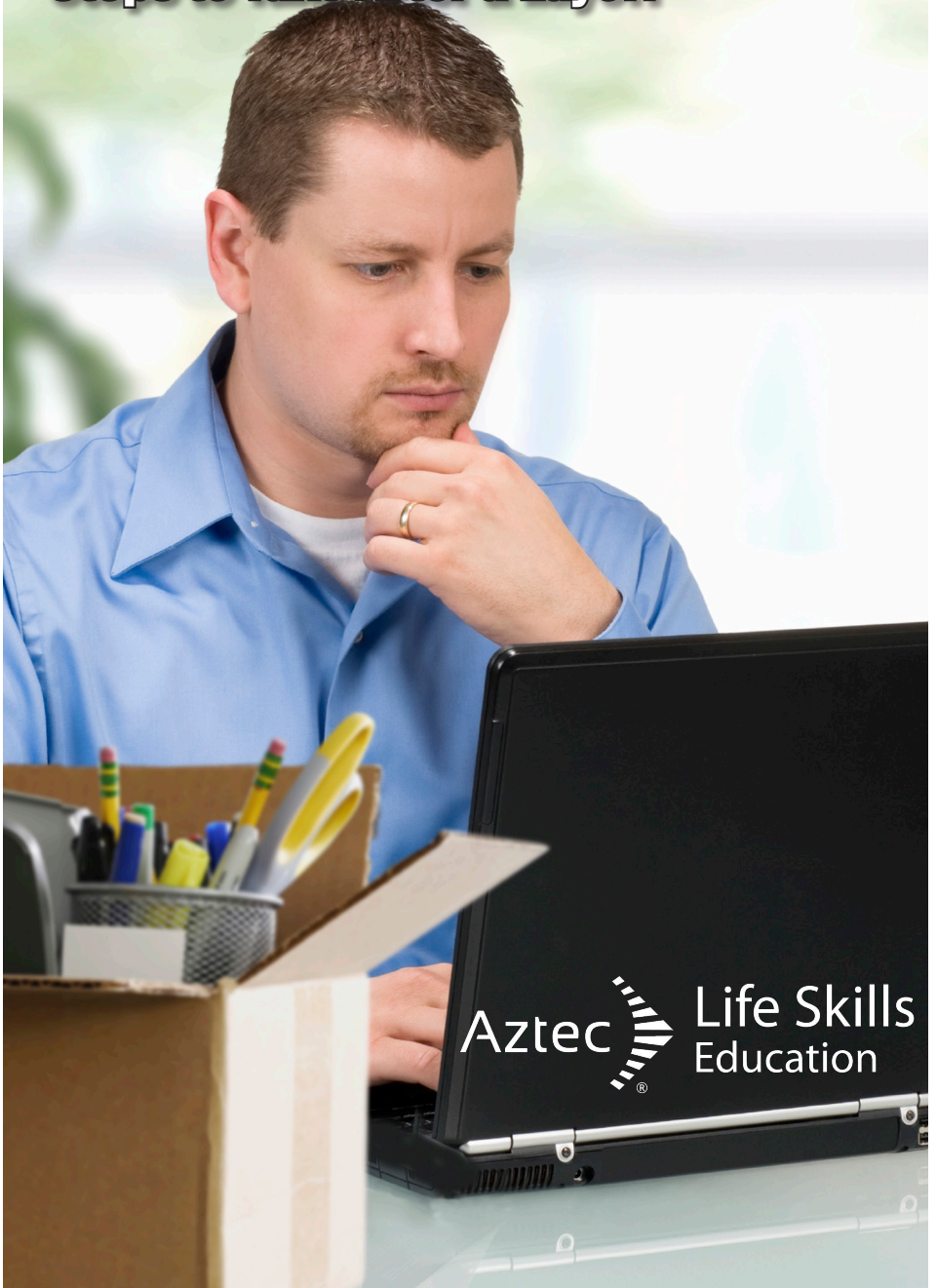


What Now?

Steps to Take After a Layoff



Aztec  Life Skills
Education

All of a sudden ...

The news you were given is not easy to accept: “Sorry, but we have decided to make a change. We’ve got to let you go.” Even if there are kind words — “It’s nothing you did; the project’s been cancelled” or “You’ve done a good job; it’s not your fault” — there’s no way around it: the message is harsh and hurtful to hear.

Although most layoffs come after a series of meetings, conferences, and rumors, it probably *feels* like the rug has been pulled out from under you. This is especially true if you learned of the layoff and your immediate termination on the same day.

There’s no getting around the fact that your life has been turned upside down. A short while ago, you had hopeful plans. Today, your future looks uncertain, or worse.



‘What do I do now?’

The profound sense of dislocation you likely feel immediately after a layoff is to be *expected* — as are a number of other feelings: anger, sorrow, anxiety, frustration, fear among them.

All of these reactions are completely normal. Not everyone expresses them in the same way (and not everyone is willing to talk about them), but they *do* affect what happens to you. We’ll look at them more closely in a moment.

Of course, you’ll eventually get over this abrupt change in your life plans. But there’s one catch: now is a time when you must make some important decisions, and your ability to decide wisely may be affected by your feelings. This booklet is a

*“He” and “she” will be used interchangeably throughout this booklet to represent both males and females.

guide for getting you through these first few weeks and months after a layoff, so you can get your career — and your life — back on track.

Finding an even keel

When faced with a problem or situation we don't like, our first (and very natural) impulse is to *react*. After a layoff, *how* you react either improves the situation or makes it worse!

You can't change the way you *feel*, but you are in control of what you *do* with your feelings. Your immediate goal is to avoid reactions that hurt yourself or another person.

- ✗ **Do not express your anger verbally or physically to anyone from work.** If you must shout, swear, or slam doors, do it at home — when no one else is around! Letting off steam is a good idea, but look for constructive ways to do it: whip a ball down a bowling alley, throw some weights around at the gym, pound the pavement with a good, long run.
- ✗ **Do not call, write, e-mail, or visit work with an attitude** that will damage the good name you earned for yourself. This will hurt you and you alone.

There's no point to going back to work just so you can "tell them what I really think of them!" How is that going to improve things? How does that get you closer to another job?

- ✓ **Do remember that layoffs are common;** the layoff wasn't directed at you personally. Potential employers will be put off by hearing your anger in job interviews. Losing your job doesn't mean you're a loser, but carrying a chip on your shoulder certainly will point you in that direction!
- ✓ **Accept the fact that strong emotions are normal** — even if you were expecting a layoff, even if it's been a few weeks since the actual event. Work is such an important part of our lives that it would be strange if you did not feel a variety

of conflicting emotions and at least some confusion about where to go next.

- ✓ **Talk with your family or trusted friends** and tell them what's happened. Keeping a layoff secret puts you under enormous stress and only adds to the feeling of loss and isolation. Talking with those close to you will make the loss seem less severe, plus you will find many allies and job leads among the people you know — leads that cannot be offered if people don't know you need the help.



What's going on?

The range of feelings following a layoff is broad and unpredictable; some of your feelings will be counter-productive and some will simply be unwelcome. It may be helpful to think of feelings the way you think about the weather: you can't control them and it's only a waste of energy to try. Let them be what they are. Don't fight them. Don't dwell on them. Storm clouds *do* pass and the sun comes out again. It's true with the weather, and it's true with our emotions.

There's no rule that says everyone will experience the same feelings or that they will occur in a certain order; your laid-off co-workers will experience feelings you don't, and vice versa. Let's look at some of the most common.

Shock

Unless your company provided you with a good deal of preparation, your layoff probably left you more than surprised, more than disappointed — stunned might be the most appropriate word. Even as that initial shock wears off, there will

be “aftershocks” as you face the surprises and problems that arise during this time when you’re between jobs.

Shock has symptoms that affect you in many ways. It ...

- causes you to feel out of sync, as though everything has completely changed but no one else sees it;
 - leaves little room for attending to matters of daily life or noticing what’s going on around you;
 - affects your appetite and your sleep, so that it’s hard to feel really OK; and
 - cuts into your memory and concentration.
- ▶ **How to handle it:** Shock goes away by itself — within a few days, most of the time. Make no decisions while you’re feeling this way; just put one foot in front of the other and follow your routine until reality returns.

Denial

Denial is the state of mind where you unreasonably cling to a hope that just isn’t realistic: “They’ll call us back to work within a few weeks ... it isn’t as serious as it looks.”

Denial can also lead you to give other people the wrong impression: “Oh, things are OK at work, but I’m thinking I might look for something else,” and “Yeah, I was laid off, but I’m fine. Just a little bump in the road. I’ve got everything under control.” The problem is, denial is like a wall separating you from others: you can’t express your needs or your aims and the people who are most likely to help you cannot because they don’t know you *need* the help!

- ▶ **How to handle it:** Say this to people you trust: “They laid off my whole department. I’m planning my next move. Any suggestions?” Such words tell people exactly what’s going on and open the door to support and opportunity.

Grief

If your life was built around your job, and perhaps even if it wasn't, you're likely to experience a deep sense of loss and sorrow when it's gone. And this makes sense: grief is our response to loss — in this case, the loss of a job and all of the people and things that were part of it.

You can recognize your grief in feelings of sadness that suddenly “sneak up on you” when you thought you were fine: loss of appetite; having trouble getting to or staying sleep (or, the opposite, sleeping all the time); and becoming tearful over minor things (or even completely out of the blue). Grief is more than just sadness; like shock, it can affect how you feel physically, mentally, and emotionally.



- ▶ **How to handle it:** Accept your feelings; don't try to change them. Allow yourself to feel how you feel. Here especially it can help to share your feelings with a friend who will listen without judging you. Your friend won't have all the answers — don't look for that — but by sharing where you are, you'll feel less alone.

Another thing you can do: Get out and move. Exercising the body really lifts the mind. You may not feel like it before you start, but the more regularly you exercise the more energy you'll have — and the less stress you'll feel. Make some form of exercise a part of your daily routine. If you can, work up a sweat!

Anger

It's a rare person who can be laid off without getting angry. And why shouldn't you feel some anger? You were doing your work, playing by the rules, and still you lost your job.

But too much anger can stop you dead in your tracks. It can keep your attention focused on the layoff — which does you no good at all — and stop you from focusing on what comes next. Just as bad, it can sour your whole outlook on life.

Be aware that anger does not express itself only through shouting and banging things around. You may find it sneaking into your mood and behavior in many ways:

- **General irritability and impatience** with people you encounter on a daily basis;
- **Resentment or jealousy** of people who seem to have everything going their way;
- **Annoyance over routine responsibilities**;
- **Fast, hostile, impatient driving**;
- **Sarcasm or belittling comments** to your partner or family members;
- **Use of alcohol or other drugs** in an attempt to quiet these “bad” feelings.



- ▶ **How to handle it:** First, watch for the symptoms listed above. Be kind to yourself and, as soon as you can, focus on the reality of the situation: “It’s not really Karen’s fault ... I’m just in a rotten mood because of the layoff.”

The way to defuse your anger? Admit it’s happening, then look to *use* it in a constructive way. Anger, after all, is a form of energy. Unlike denial and sorrow, it makes you want to *do* something — so do something positive!

Each time you find yourself beginning to stew, take some deep breaths and turn your gaze *forward* — take a step in your job search (make a phone call, follow up on a lead, etc.) or do something else important to your immediate future (whether that means making a healthy meal for yourself, cleaning the kitchen, or doing the laundry). Your goal is to burn off the energy, not hurt someone with it.

Fear, anxiety, insecurity

There are lots of reasons to feel insecure when you've been laid off. You wonder about such things as your car loan, the vacation you planned, or your rent payment. You think: "What will happen? Where's the money going to come from?"

Perhaps the most worrisome question of all is, "How long will this last?" It's the uncertainty that's so unnerving. There's just no way of knowing *how* long it will take for you to get a job.

About the only thing we know for sure is that if you put 40-plus hours a week into looking for work, you *are* going to find a job a lot sooner than if you go on vacation for a few weeks!

- ▶ **How to handle it:** The most effective way to deal with anxiety is to, as much as you can, actively prepare to change the situation. When you have a *plan* and a *schedule* of job-seeking activities to look over and implement, you'll feel in control — doing what needs to be done to get a job.

Right turns, wrong turns

In dealing with the stressful emotions of a layoff, there are certain reactions to avoid:

- ✗ **Don't swallow your feelings or just wish them away.** It won't work. And trying will only make you sick.
- ✗ **Don't take your tensions out on the people around you.** The layoff isn't your fault, but it's not *their* fault, either.
- ✗ **Don't use alcohol or other drugs to quiet your feelings.** They will only dull your feelings temporarily. They will take your energy away from your plan. And they can cause depression.

Instead, deal with your feelings in ways that are accepting, positive, and constructive:

- ✓ **Do exercise every day.** It makes you feel good about yourself and — most importantly — puts your energy where it belongs. If you don't already do it, you'll be surprised how much regular exercise makes a difference.
- ✓ **Do share your feelings with someone close.** It really does lighten the burden.
- ✓ **Do keep up your connections** with family, friends, church, and social organizations. You are strongest when you're part of a community — besides, some seventy percent of all new jobs are found through such contacts!
- ✓ **Do put some thought into your plan and then move on it.** Your plan is your route to feeling better and doing better.

Staying afloat

When you're "between jobs," whatever concerns you have about money are likely to escalate dramatically. To keep your head above water, you need to balance *how much you have* with *how much you need*.

Fill in the worksheet that follows. This is important: Don't ignore your finances because "I can't do anything about it anyway." If you don't like the figures you're faced with, the sooner you know what they truly are, the sooner you can take steps to improve them!

I. EXPENSES (Monthly basic needs)

Rent/mortgage	\$ _____
Property tax (divide annual figure by 12)	\$ _____
Food	\$ _____
Utilities (gas, electricity, heating)	\$ _____
Telephone	\$ _____
Transportation (car, bus fares, parking, etc.)	\$ _____
Clothing	\$ _____

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