

Am I Alone?



## The Devastating Psychological Impact of Unemployment and Society's Moral Responsibility

Perhaps the most prevalent feeling the newly unemployed experiences is that of loneliness. Even if we are the victims of a major layoff in which many other coworkers leave at the same time, each of us deeply feels a sense of loss way down in our soul.

Loss of who we are -- getting up each morning and having a place of employment to go to is gone -- and often times our sense of identity goes with it. Loss of our jobs not only has a detrimental economic effect, but can crush our psyche as well. Our perceived self worth is often times intrinsically connected to our titles and what we accomplish through our jobs - taking good care of our families by providing them a roof over their head, food to eat, clothing and having the extra money to do fun things together; solving problems and issues at work and being a valued member of the team; feeling like a productive member of society.

<sup>1</sup>A recent study, entitled "The Anguish of Unemployment," was conducted by the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University in New Jersey, and was based on surveys of 1,200 people who are currently unemployed or have been in the past 12 months. The vast majority of respondents said that they experienced anxiety, helplessness, depression, stress and sleeping problems after losing their jobs. Others described despair about finding employment at older ages.

Satisfactory employment has many benefits that unemployed people are denied. These benefits are firstly financial, but equally important are the assignment of identity and status, the increased social contact, being part of a collective purpose and joint effort, and being able to engage in regular activity.<sup>2</sup> The substantial cuts to income that most unemployed people face are associated with real and relative deprivation that, in itself, can be psychologically destructive. Poverty clearly affects physical and psychological well-being. It also reduces confidence and restricts personal [relationships] and empowerment.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Research by Arthur T. Goldsmith, a Jackson T. Stephens Professor of Economics at Washington and Lee University warns of the devastating and possibly permanent psychological effects of joblessness. Feelings of hopelessness increase with longer terms of unemployment and so does the chance of adverse long-term impact on individuals.

Interestingly, Goldsmith goes on to talk about those individuals who may be left behind in an organization, the ones that don't get laid off at first. They may, "try to protect themselves by demonstrating to their employer that they are a model employee." These individuals who try to demonstrate they are indispensable and then are let go suffer deep psychological impacts, too.

Goldsmith points out that with the current economic crisis, there is fear on many different levels. "The situation right now is fraught with the potential to have a great impact on the overall emotional well being of American society."<sup>5</sup> When 31 million Americans are either unemployed, underemployed or have given up looking for work due to the scarcity of jobs, the resulting psychological effects should be a concern to everyone.

<sup>6</sup>Dr. David Fryer, a psychologist from Stirling University in Scotland, studied the psychological effects of unemployment for 14 years. In 1995, before an audience at Massey University, he stated that research into the effects of unemployment over the last 60 years has produced 'worryingly consistent findings'. These findings have implications for society as a whole.

Regarding recessions and mental health, Dr. Fryer stated, "Mass unemployment affects many more people than those so far discussed [the unemployed]: trade union influence is reduced, wages are depressed for those in jobs, improvements to the working environment regarding health and safety and the 'humanization of work' are slowed down or put into reverse, employment as rehabilitation after physical injury, illness, mental breakdown and prison becomes decreasingly available and minorities become increasingly vulnerable to exclusion from the labor market with consequent further marginalization and impoverishment. All these factors impinge on mental health via the labor market."

The prevailing sense of loneliness, loss of identity and depressive symptoms are overwhelming to unemployed individuals, and it is not wise for society to allow these individuals to bear this burden alone. All of humanity should be concerned and motivated to find solutions. The devastating effect of this Great Recession are so prevalent and have been so far reaching that the resulting effects for society could be as detrimental as the H1N1 pandemic. Contrastingly, collectively we have the power to eradicate unemployment and its demoralizing effects.

Each of us should be asking ourselves, "How can I help?"

For the families of the unemployed, realize that your loved one is under tremendous strain. Almost their entire sense of identity has been torn away. *You* are all they have left. Your understanding for, and collaboration with them will go a long way to alleviate their anxiety.

For those of you who have not been a victim of a layoff, or for those left behind in a company who has laid your coworkers off, consider yourself very fortunate. You already know you may be next. Hopefully you realize that in today's climate, the layoffs aren't based on your value but rather on the company's financial bottom line. Additionally, consider what responsibility you may have to help your laid off coworkers. Don't avoid them. Open the lines of communication and offer assistance.

Wall Street and company CEOs responsible for the collapse of our financial system including our retirement plans, the outsourcing of jobs and plant closures, cannot be called American capitalists. Those making thousands if not millions more than their workers with absolutely no regard to anything other than profit, *beware* . . . eventually we all are held accountable for our actions.

For those in government who have the ability to create and change laws such as trade agreements, [The Foreign Investment Tax Credit](#)<sup>7</sup> and [The Patriot Corporations of America Act of 2009](#)<sup>8</sup> which guide our companies and encourage them to either outsource our jobs or invest in Americans, act now without delay because the individuals you have been elected to protect are suffering egregiously and the whole fabric of America is at stake of breaking down.

And for you, the unemployed, your value is not based merely on what you can do or provide. Your inherent worth is in the fact that you are a human being and part of the human race. *You are not alone and you will persevere*. Band together; don't suffer in silence - find your collective voice, empower yourselves and influence Congress to create favorable worker laws and jobs so this epidemic will never occur again. The IAMAW is with you every step of the way and will do everything within our power to protect your rights!

#### Bibliography

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