

# Facing Up To Redundancy



**“In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.”**

Albert Einstein, German-born physicist  
(1879–1955)

**“No matter how hard the loss, defeat might serve as well as victory to shake the soul and let the glory out.”**

Al Gore, US politician and climate change  
campaigner

**“When we are no longer able to change a situation ... we are challenged to change ourselves.”**

Viktor Frankl, Austrian psychiatrist  
(1905–1997)

Redundancy, particularly if it is unexpected, can be one of the most disturbing events in anyone’s professional life. While the lucky few may be able to accept the loss of a job with equanimity and simply go and find another, the emotional impact for many individuals and families can be devastating.

The loss of income and benefits can combine with feelings of blame, resentment and a loss of identity to leave people feeling frightened vulnerable and alone. And it’s not just the person losing the job who is affected. Spouses, partners, extended family and friends can all be touched in one way or another.

Having said all of that, redundancy can also offer a golden opportunity to reassess one’s values, talents and priorities and move through the crisis towards a renewed sense of ambition, purpose and fulfillment. There is a choice.

There are a multitude of legal and administrative considerations linked to your rights and entitlements if you are made redundant. For the purposes of this Helpsheets, however, we will focus on the emotional responses that you can expect to experience if you are laid off, and what you can practically do about them. If you feel that you would like to discuss any of the issues raised, the **CiC 24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline** is available for practical and emotional support.

## What is redundancy?

While there are certainly emotional consequences to getting the sack or resigning from a job, we are looking here at redundancy, which is something very different.

Formal redundancy covers three basic situations:

- An employer ceases to conduct business on a permanent or temporary basis
- An employer ceases business in the place where the employee is employed
- An employer's business no longer requires any employees or as many employees to do a particular kind of job.

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## Fear of the unknown

Beyond that initial sense of helplessness, redundancy can then unleash a whole range of fears and anxieties that operate on several different levels.

Most immediately, there are the financial stresses associated with loss of income. Although retrenchment normally comes with some kind of payment package, the fear it triggers for one's financial future and stability can be crippling. The loss of a job can also mean the loss of certain practical benefits, such as leisure facilities, travel allowances and annual holidays.

On a subtler level, losing a job can have a profound impact on one's sense of identity. Whether we like it or not, the job that we do plays a significant part in determining our sense of who we are. "If I'm not an accountant/sales manager/policeman/journalist (fill in the blank), then who am I?" we ask.

Being made redundant, then, can transport people back to much earlier times in their lives when they were establishing our sense of self in the adult world of work, triggering vulnerabilities and fears that they thought had long been left behind. It's not a comfortable place to be.

Perhaps the profoundest fear to be provoked by redundancy is, quite simply, that of the unknown. No matter what we do for work, our job acts as an anchor in an unpredictable and unstable world. We base our sanity, in part, on having a reliable base and for many of us, that is our job. Whatever happens, we at least know that we will get up tomorrow and go to work. Without it, we lose one of the central signposts of our life.

What we can say, then, is that redundancy is not someone's fault (i.e. it is not caused by their own negligence) and it is not their own decision (i.e. an employee cannot make themselves redundant.)

And herein lies the emotional turbulence. At least initially, it takes away our sense of agency, our feeling that we are in command of our lives and of what we do. Put simply, it can make us feel helpless.



Fear, like stress and anger, is contagious. So someone who is afraid of an unknown future can often start subtly transmitting that fear to those close to them. While it is critically important to openly discuss one's anxieties with loved ones (and we'll talk more of that later), it is also important to keep an eye on the relationship strain that can be caused by this kind of unconscious communication.

A husband who is made redundant, for instance, can start making his wife feel very nervous indeed. He may now be physically in the house when he used to get up and go to the office. This may obstruct his wife's activities quite literally, but on an emotional level, she will also begin to pick up his boredom, frustration and fear. Children can also be deeply affected.

## Understanding grief

Losing one's job is a catastrophic personal loss that can have a very similar impact to bereavement or divorce. The common emotional denominator in all these events is grief for what we have lost, but many people find it so hard to cope because they simply don't understand what they are experiencing. They also don't grasp that there is an emotional process triggered by grief that can be identified, processed and (with a bit of help and time) put behind them.

A useful guide to understanding grief is the work of Swiss-born psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who identified five separate stages in the way people respond to tragedy.

- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

She stressed that they do not necessarily always follow the same order, and everyone affected by grief does not necessarily experience every single stage. They can also be cyclical, moving from one stage to the next and back again. But when it comes to losing a job, they can act as a guide to what you are feeling, and a reassurance that your responses are perfectly normal.

In denial, which is essentially borne out of shock, you might simply refuse to accept what is happening to you.

Somewhere in the back of your mind, you cling to the notion that it's all just a bad dream. In anger, you might then start lashing out at those around you for what you perceive as a grave injustice. The bargaining stage involves seeking in vain for some kind of way out. "If I ask for a 50 percent pay cut, maybe they'll keep me on," you might say.

In depression, a sense of despair and pointlessness can take over as the inevitability of the situation sinks in. This can also represent an attempt to bottle up the anger, which then gets turned inwards. Internal messages might then say something like, "Well, it was always going to happen, you were no good at your job anyway."

But beyond this emotional rollercoaster, a sense of acceptance will gradually emerge. This is the point at which you begin to uncover practical solutions to your predicament and a sense of purpose in finding realistic ways to get on with your life and career.

It is also worth pointing out that these responses may not be limited to those within a company who have been made redundant. Those who have kept their jobs may suffer a similar range of feelings, for all sorts of reasons. (They've lost a valued colleague and friend, the working life they were used to has now irrevocably changed, they may also worry that their job may be on the line the next time lay-offs are announced.)

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## So what should I actually do?

Returning to those who have actually lost their jobs, recognizing the phases that you are likely to go through will equip you to respond in ways that allow for the emotional swings and roundabouts and take you gently into the next phase of your life. Here are some suggestions:

**1. Look after yourself.** Discovering that you are being made redundant is a shock to the system, on both emotional and physical levels. Fight-or-flight responses to the immediate stress unleash all sorts of stress hormones in your body, which ramp up the psychological anxiety, which in turn wears down your physical capacities to cope. Seeking sanctuary in alcohol, drugs, over-eating, television or other avoidant activities will only work against you in the long run. And a long run it is going to

be, so go easy on yourself. Eat well, get plenty of sleep, stick to a gentle exercise regime and above all, don't beat yourself up.

**2. Do not withdraw.** Denial and anger both require enormous amounts of energy to maintain, so it can be tempting to close in on oneself in a bid to maintain a sense of stability. This is, of course, the worst thing you can do. Isolation is a fast-track to depression, eroding one's motivation and sense self worth. If nothing else, make sure you get up and get dressed every day. Lying around the house in your pyjamas will dig you into a very deep hole indeed. Going for a brisk walk first thing can set you up for the day. Beyond practical self-care, the various emotional stages of grief can only be

effectively processed if they are shared with others. So talk to friends and other colleagues going through the same experience. On a practical level, you will also need to start networking for other jobs. So if you don't talk to anyone, how will you ever know what's out there? If you can't think who to talk to, call up the **CiC 24-hour Adviceline** and talk to a qualified counsellor.

- 3. Stabilise your finances.** Unless you've been awarded an extremely generous severance package, it is likely that money will be tight for a while until you find your next job. If you are in serious debt, you can call up **CiC** and ask to speak to one of our trained debt advisors. If not, you need to get a clear picture of what's going out and what's going to be coming in. Take a close look at unnecessary expenses, stop using credit if you can, and draw up a realistic expense budget. The picture may not be pretty in the short term, but you will spare yourself a tremendous amount of anxiety if you at least have a realistic grasp of what's going on. If at all possible, do not dip into money that you are saving for retirement.
- 4. Reassess.** As frightening as it is to lose your job, it is also a pivotal opportunity to re-evaluate where your real interests, passions and talents lie. Seize the chance to think deeply about what it is that you really want to do in life. Is the time to re-train in another profession? Or

go freelance? Or move out of the big city? Many, many people are stuck in jobs that they don't really like, so now is your chance to take a huge step towards a more fulfilling life. You might want to read the "The Artist's Way At Work" by Mark Bryan, Julia Cameron and Catherine Allen. Packed with interesting exercises and powerful motivational tips, the book is a rich and fascinating resource for re-connecting with your creativity in the workplace.

- 5. Get practical.** Depression will tell you that there is no point in doing anything because no good will come of it. It's a perfect self-perpetuating lie, because if you buy into it and end up doing nothing, no good will indeed come of it, thus confirming your initial flawed assumption. So even if you're taking tiny steps, you have to keep taking them. Set small achievable goals such as re-writing your CV, calling up a career counselor, or compiling a list of networking contacts who might be able to help you find a new job . . . and stick to it. Be gentle with yourself, and don't overdo it. Take regular breaks and don't stop doing the things that bring you joy. But make sure you have a concrete task every day, no matter how small. Despair has to be fought, and a little effort goes an awfully long way.

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## Books

### **What Colour Is Your Parachute?: A Practical Manual for Job-hunters and Career Changers**

by Richard Nelson Bolles

### **The Artist's Way at Work: Twelve Weeks to Creative Freedom**

by Mark Bryan, Julia Cameron, Catherine Allen

### **Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes**

by William Bridges

## Further help and information

CiC – Supporting Organisations

[www.well-online.co.uk](http://www.well-online.co.uk)

24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline,  
providing emotional and practical support.

