



Families Taking Charge: Dealing with Unemployment

*Authored by Celia Ray Hayhoe, Ph.D., CFP®, Virginia Tech,
and reviewed by Crystal Tyler-Mackey, Extension Specialist, Community Viability, Virginia Tech*

Introduction

When people go through any type of change, the change may trigger a period of grief and feelings of loss. When people become unemployed, they may feel a loss of identity since Americans tend to describe themselves in terms of their job. Any change means grieving for what was and coping with what is to come.

Unemployment may mean changing careers, losing touch with friends at work, or moving to a new area of the state, country, or even another country. Worries about finding a new job, adjusting to a new work place, and managing financially until a new job is found can cause the person to display behavior he or she and the family can't understand. The individual may not be able to look for another job right away and may be very angry. Family members may not understand why the person is acting this way. By applying the stages of grief and loss to recent unemployment, families may better understand what is happening and how to help.

Stages of Grief and Loss

The stages of grief and loss are Shock/Denial, Disorganization, Volatile Emotions, Guilt, Loss and Loneliness, Relief, and Recovery. It is important to understand that these stages are not distinctive. They overlap. A person will drift between them which can be very frustrating, especially when anger and other emotions come back. Events in the unemployed person's new life, such as a bad job interview, may cause the person to go to any of the stages. The person and family need to understand that this is part of dealing with unemployment. They need to understand that this is a normal part of going through the change.

Shock/Denial

- In denial, people refuse to discuss the issue and act as if it isn't happening. Denial may keep the unemployed person from putting plans into place and cause friction between them and family members who don't understand why they are not acting. The individuals feel isolated because they think they have no one who will listen to them and/or is willing to talk to them about what is happening. Family and friends may not know what to say so they avoid saying anything at all. Shock is a defense mechanism that is nature's way of helping us through an unbearable situation.
- Signs of this stage may include feelings of numbness, wanting to escape, avoidance, or asking the unanswerable question "Why?"
- In this stage it helps to have someone assist the person's family and friends to be empathetic listeners so that they show the unemployed person they understand what they're feeling. During this stage people are not ready to act. They don't need solutions; they need to feel that they are heard. The family may need to reassign roles dealing with family finances until the unemployed member is ready to act. The individual can slip back into this stage each time there are new developments.

Disorganization

- Disorganization adds the feelings of uncertainty and confusion as the numbness of the first stage wears off. Family and friends may not want to interfere since the unemployed person is physically present. The unemployed person may

seem to take forever to assemble materials for a job interview and may avoid taking action until it is too late.

- Signs of this stage are confusion, incoherent communication, and feelings of being out of touch.

Visit Virginia Cooperative Extension: ext.vt.edu

Virginia Cooperative Extension programs and employment are open to all, regardless of age, color, disability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, veteran status, or any other basis protected by law. An equal opportunity/affirmative action employer. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Virginia State University, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture cooperating. Edwin J. Jones, Director, Virginia Cooperative Extension, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg; M. Ray McKinnie, Administrator, 1890 Extension Program, Virginia State University, Petersburg.

2020

2811-7015 (FCS-139NP)