

Helping others face life after layoffs

Posted by [rhiggs](#) December 16, 2008 00:00AM

A regular bout of holiday depression is devastating.

Try surviving this year's strain.

With record job losses, a tumbling stock market and a rocky economic forecast, the holiday blues are hitting more of us -- and hitting harder -- than they have in years.

"It's going to be much more challenging this year," says Louis Weigele, director of behavioral health at The Free Medical Clinic of Greater Cleveland and a board member of Cuyahoga County's Mental Health Advocacy Coalition.

Other therapists are seeing an increase in stress and depression, too.

"There are some real tough things going on in people's lives," says Scott Bea, a clinical psychologist at the Cleveland Clinic. "The economy just adds to an already tough time for people anyway."

"Then, on top of that," says Weigele, "is the anticipation of more change."

If you still have a job and are financially stable -- for now -- there are lots of ways you can help those who aren't.

1. Reach out: "We feel so self-conscious sometimes -- and we feel guilty - if we're one of the people who continues to have a job when somebody else doesn't," says Weigele. "But it's very important to let people know that you're there and that you're thinking about them. The bigger risk, if somebody loses a job, is that we forget about them."

Invite them to dinner or lunch, send a note, an e-mail or call, says Jeffrey Janata, director of the Behavioral Medicine Program in the Department of Psychiatry at University Hospitals Case Medical Center.

2. Talk about what's happened: "Say 'I heard you lost your job,' " Bea says. "Addressing the obvious is an important thing."

Avoiding the subject, he says, is only protecting us from our own discomfort.

Don't say, "I understand how you feel."

"Because you may not," Bea says. "Instead you can ask that they help you understand."

"And let them know that your friendship and your relationship with them is important and you're not going anywhere."

3. Listen: "Give them an opportunity to express what they're feeling," Janata says. "There's a lot of research that shows that when we have negative emotions, it feels better to us when we're able to express them. It provides an emotional release."

"It helps almost always to feel as though the stress that we're feeling is a shared one. There's a sense of community, a sense of 'I'm not in this alone.' " **Jeffrey Janata, clinical psychologist, University Hospitals Case Medical Center**

Therapists suggest something called "active listening." To do that, repeat some of what the other person tells you, in your words. Then add a feeling word to it.

For example, if a friend says, "I can't stand being out of work," say, "I know you really don't like being unemployed. It must be really frustrating."

"It says you're valuable and your experience is important to me," Bea says.

4. Offer to help: "I think anytime we express support, we communicate some compassion for the situation, some understanding for it," says Janata. "And that certainly is helpful."

So ask the person what he or she needs. Then do your best to provide it.

But set limits. Let them know you can't provide money or a job.

5. Ask how they want to approach the holidays: This is especially true for family members. Let them change the traditions this year to fit their budget. "Just basic communication about what might work best is a good thing," Bea says.

6. Make sure unemployed friends and family are taking care of themselves: "Steer them to job support groups, employment resources," Weigele says.

And away from drinking, gambling and other addictions.

Another big help? Get them to exercise.

"It adds structure and interaction with others," says Weigele, "and it can help the person simply feel better about themselves."

7. Suggest volunteering, especially in an area that could lead to work:

"They're doing something valuable for another person, they're getting out of the house, they're not dwelling on their own concerns and they're also putting themselves in a position to meet other people who may be resources for them," Weigele says.

8. Steer the conversation away from the past and toward the future: Ask what their plans are, what changes they're making to get through the coming months, so that they're thinking about how to take care of themselves, not dwelling on the past.

9. Be on the lookout for serious problems: "When we worry is when people begin to demonstrate loss of function -- loss of family function or occupational function or social function, when they're not doing well in any one of those areas," Janata says. "If they become socially withdrawn or begin to express hopelessness and certainly if they begin talking about suicide."

Other red flags include extreme or prolonged sadness and feelings of worthlessness.

10. If you spot serious signs, guide them to a professional counselor: As Bea says: "Acts of giving don't have to have a price tag."

"The greatest gift during the holidays is caring about each other."

Categories: [Diane Suchetka](#), [Healthy Cleveland](#), [Impact](#)