

Counseling Unemployed Clients

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Faculty Disclosure

Contributing faculty, Alice Yick Flanagan, PhD, MSW, has disclosed no relevant financial relationship with any product manufacturer or service provider mentioned.

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Audience

This introductory course is designed for psychologists who work with clients who are unemployed.

Accreditations & Approvals



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Course Objective

The purpose of this course is to provide practitioners with the knowledge and tools necessary to effectively counsel clients who are unemployed or are facing imminent job loss.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this course, you should be able to:

1. Define unemployment, underemployment, and the work force, including the current state of employment in the United States.
2. Discuss what work means to people on a psychological and social level.
3. Explain the various mental health, physiologic, social, and familial consequences of losing a job and persistent job loss.
4. Discuss how individuals cope with job loss and identify factors that influence coping strategies.
5. Evaluate various job search strategies.
6. Analyze the role of Internet technology in job searching.
7. Discuss practice implications for mental health professionals who are working with unemployed clients in their practice.

INTRODUCTION

According to the U.S. Labor Department, as of October 2022, the number of unemployed persons in the United States numbered 6.1 million, which translates to an unemployment rate of 3.7% [1]. During this period, the unemployment rate for men and women 20 years of age and older was 3.3% and 3.4%, respectively. An estimated 19% of these individuals had been unemployed for 27 weeks or more [1]. Also in October 2022, it was estimated that there were 371,000 discouraged workers, defined as individuals not looking for employment because they believe there are no jobs available [1].

These trends reflect the economy's instability and unpredictability, and many workers do not expect the same job security past generations may have experienced. A range of factors, including globalization, rapid technologic changes, and organizational restructuring, contribute to job insecurity. Furthermore, with layoffs, stagnant growth in some industry sectors, and workers being displaced because of the requirement of new technologic skills, many have argued that career development is a journey, necessitating adaptation to changes in the marketplace [2].

In the United States, employed adults spend a significant portion of their lives, one-third to half of all waking hours, at work [3]. American adults derive much of their identity, self-concept, life satisfaction, and life meaning through their work. As a result, unemployment can trigger questions about identity: Who am I? What is the meaning of life? What is my purpose in life? Unemployment can also alter social roles, and social roles and personal identity are often intertwined. The goal of this course is to increase the knowledge of practitioners who work with clients

who are unemployed or are facing imminent job loss. Meanings of work, how individuals are affected by unemployment, how unemployed individuals cope, and the theories that have been developed to provide a framework in understanding individuals' responses to unemployment will be reviewed. Practice implications will also be reviewed so social workers, counselors, therapists, and psychologists will be better prepared to counsel those who are unemployed or facing job loss.

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, someone who is employed holds a job, while someone who does not have a job but is available for work and/or has actively looked for work in the prior four weeks is considered unemployed [4]. Individuals who do not fall into either of these two categories are considered not to be in the labor force. For example, a full-time mother caring for her children and the household who is not holding a paid job or looking for work is categorized as not in the labor force. Long-term unemployment is defined as those who are unemployed for 27 weeks or more [5]. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics defines displaced workers as individuals 20 years of age and older who have lost or left a job because the company, plant, or factory closed or moved, their position changed or was eliminated, or there was insufficient work [6]. In this course, the general term "job loss" will be used to capture the concept of displacement. Finally, although this course focuses on those who are unemployed, some of the concepts will apply to employment insecurity. Employment insecurity is defined as unease or apprehension about the continuity of a job [7].

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE BY GENDER AND RACE/ETHNICITY	
Race/Gender	Unemployment Rate ^a
All adult men	3.3%
All adult women	3.4%
Black/African American men and women	5.9%
Hispanic/Latino men and women	4.2%
White men and women	3.2%
Asian men and women	2.9%
^a Rate as of October 2022 for persons 20 years of age and older.	
Source: [1]	Table 1

MEDIAN NUMBER OF WEEKS OF UNEMPLOYMENT BY RACE/ETHNICITY ^a	
Race	Weeks of Unemployment
White	13.1
African American	18.6
Asian American	16.3
Hispanic/Latino	14.4
^a Data as of 2019 for persons 20 years of age and older. Data for 2020 is available, but unemployment time was significantly higher for all groups, temporarily, during to the COVID 19 pandemic and does not accurately reflect the current unemployment situation.	
Source: [8]	Table 2

UNEMPLOYMENT TRENDS IN THE UNITED STATES

As noted, the unemployment rate in October 2022 was 3.7% [1]. Because the unemployment rate changes monthly, it can be difficult to have a clear picture of the problem. Since 2011, employment has decreased in the mining, self-employed agriculture, leisure and hospitality, and government sectors while rising in health care, construction, information, wholesale trade, retail trade, financial activities, transportation, warehousing, and food services [71]. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a large, temporary increase in national unemployment, which began in approximately March 2020 and affected workers in all sectors but most sharply in the retail trade and leisure and hospitality sectors [72]. By the middle of 2022, overall unemployment had returned to prepandemic levels, with some shuffling of the

workforce. Employment in leisure and hospitality remains lower, while manufacturing, construction, retail, and health care/education have added jobs compared with 2019–2020. As of October 2022, the labor force participation rate (62.2%), which declined during the pandemic, remains 1.2% lower than February 2020 [1].

Among those who were unemployed in October 2022, approximately 45% were unemployed due to layoffs or jobs ending and 14.6% had left a job voluntarily [1]. In terms of race/ethnicity and gender, the unemployment rate appears to be highest among black/African American men and women (**Table 1**).

According to data from 2019–2020, African Americans are unemployed for the longest duration across all racial groups, with whites experiencing the shortest duration (**Table 2**) [8].

The unemployment rate decreases as educational and ability level increases for individuals 25 years of age and older [1]. Individuals 16 years of age and older without a disability have a lower unemployment rate compared to those with a disability.

MOTIVATIONS AND MEANINGS OF WORK

The motivations and meanings of work vary among individuals and over the lifespan. These variations are influenced by culture, educational level, socio-economic status, and previous socialization. The meaning of work is also influenced by personal work values and motivations. Work motivation is defined as, “a set of energetic forces that originates both within as well as beyond an individual’s being to initiate work-related behavior, and to determine its form, direction, intensity, and duration” [9].

In general, the literature has classified three typologies of work values or motivations: extrinsic, intrinsic, and social/relational [10]. Extrinsic values focus on job security, with an emphasis on income for general life maintenance and security [10]. One of the basic functions of work is a means for survival, to meet basic needs for subsistence [11]. Work also functions as a pathway to material, social, and financial power, which then allows one access to various resources [11].

The second work motivation category is intrinsic. This is based on self-actualization goals made in the pursuit of growth, creativity, and autonomy [10]. The last category is social/relational values, which emphasizes work as a means for positive social relations and contributions to society [10]. The idea that work can be a vehicle to self-actualization is not necessarily a new concept, as Maslow stated in the 1970s that if employees do not view their work as having purpose, they will not achieve their fullest professional capacity [12]. Based on his hierarchy of needs, Maslow argued that all individuals, after having fulfilled their basic needs, will want to move up the hierarchy to more intrinsic needs with a higher

cause. In relation to work, Maslow conceptualized the values on the upper levels of the hierarchy as “B-values,” meaning that they define one’s being. These include goodness, transcendence, justice, truth, and meaningfulness [12].

Others have categorized work values or motivations similarly but have employed different terms. Blustein argues that work “functions as the focal point for individuals as they interact with the social, political, and economic world. In effect, when people work or consider work, they are engaging in an overt and complex relationship with their social world” [13]. In essence, work is not a discrete entity that is separated from other domains of life. Rather, work and other dimensions of life intersect, dynamically influencing all aspects of human functioning [13]. Some classify work motivation theories according to two major categories: exogenous and endogenous processes [14]. Exogenous processes refer to external rewards or incentives, while endogenous processes are internal factors, such as expectations and attitudes, that mediate behaviors. Exogenous theories regarding work motivation include [14]:

- Incentive-reward theory: Incentives and rewards are stimuli that lead employees to associate certain behaviors with a benefit. This triggers a positive psychological state that helps to maintain the desired behavior.
- Goal theory: When goals are clearly identified and defined but challenging and attractive, individuals will perform at a higher level.
- Personal and material resource theory: This theory describes conditions that assist in facilitating employees’ goals and promoting motivation. These conditions might include maximizing individuals’ competencies in the workplace or having materials in the workplace to facilitate task completion.
- Group and norm theory: At work, the group includes colleagues and peers. The group can serve as a means for promoting certain norms and sanctions and also as a monitoring mechanism for performance.

Theories regarding endogenous factors that influence work performance include [14]:

- Expectancy-valence theory: In general, individuals are motivated when they know that efforts they expend will yield performance and achieve objectives.
- Self-efficacy theory: Individuals who have a greater sense of confidence in their abilities are more likely to have higher standards related to work and their performance. They will also have more favorable attitudes about their work, which promotes a greater commitment to the work task.
- Equity theory: Overall, individuals seek justice and are motivated by fair and equitable treatment. When employees perceive that their inputs (e.g., ability, time, talent) are balanced with the outcomes (e.g., money, promotions, benefits), they are more motivated to work well.

Six key characteristics have been proposed to facilitate meaningfulness in work [13; 15]:

- Social purpose and usefulness: Individuals find meaning in their work when they can see that their tasks contribute to the overall good of society.
- Autonomy: Autonomy and self-determination are defined as the feeling or belief that one has control of his/her life and direction. Employees will feel that their work is meaningful when they believe they are independently exercising their talents, skills, competencies, and professional judgment.
- Opportunities for professional development and learning: In general, individuals will find meaning in their work if they feel they are growing professionally and moving forward rather than remaining stagnant. When there are avenues for learning new skills and new ways of thinking, individuals feel they are improving themselves.

- Moral connectedness: Employees will find work meaningful when the work is guided by a code of ethics, responsibility, and morality.
- Quality of relationships: Sense of connectedness is crucial in life, and individuals strive for relational connectedness in their workplace. When employees have positive and supportive working relationships, they are more likely to find their work meaningful. A spirit of collaboration among colleagues also facilitates meaning.
- Recognition: Both extrinsic rewards, like salary raises and promotions, and intrinsic rewards, such as earning the respect of colleagues, contribute to individuals finding meaning in their work.

However, creating meaning at and through work has also been categorized by stage or level. According to one consulting firm, three predominant themes, organized by micro, mezzo, and macro levels, contribute to a feeling of meaning at work [16]:

- Individual (micro) level: Employees find meaning when they can identify their sense of self at work, find a balance between work and personal lives, and view personal and organization values as being consistent.
- Organizational (mezzo) level: Meaning is found when employees experience a sense of community at work and a feeling that they are contributing to something bigger than themselves. Motivated workers see themselves contributing to the organization's success and can find supportive relationships with their work peers and colleagues.
- Societal (macro) level: Employees find meaning when they feel they are part of an organization that assumes a social and corporate responsibility and are proud to be affiliated with their employer.

CONSEQUENCES OF UNEMPLOYMENT

Economically, job loss can result in a decrease of annual earnings between 25% and 45% [17]. Furthermore, the simple loss of the structure of daily routines and contact with coworkers can cause a disruption in one's life [18]. Because much of the fabric of American values is rooted in a Western traditional work ethic and individualism, when productivity is threatened, it can lead to feelings of guilt and inadequacy [18]. The consequences of unemployment or imminent job loss do not only affect the individual but can have ripple effects on children, spouses, and the family. Unemployment can alter social roles and personal identity, which can cause stress, anxiety, and friction in relationships. For example, if the previous breadwinner finds him or herself assuming more of a caretaking role while his or her partner becomes the breadwinner, the reversal of traditional roles can lead to resentment [18].

Job loss can have profound negative psychological and physical health ramifications. Some scholars have coined the term "job loss grief" to describe the process of coming to terms with unemployment. This process is believed to parallel the bereavement process, marked by feelings of despair, depression, anger, social isolation, and loss of control [19]. The emotional stages are very similar to Kübler-Ross's stages of grief [20; 21]. Therefore, when working with clients who are unemployed, mental health professionals should assess for stress reactions, depression, anxiety, and self-esteem issues. This section will delve into the familial, social, economic, psychological, mental health, and physical health implications of unemployment.

SOCIAL AND FAMILIAL CONSEQUENCES

Marital Relationships

Economic stressors resulting from unemployment will inevitably affect the family system, particularly the quality of the marital relationship. Many studies have shown a correlation between marital problems and unemployment, but the exact relationship is not completely clear. In a study with 1,878 Finnish couples, individuals' poor economic situations were related to increased levels of psychological distress [22]. In turn, psychological distress negatively impacted marital adjustment.

The process of adjusting to job loss can impact how each individual in a couple perceives himself or herself and each other. According to role theory, assumed roles are based on social, cultural, and institutional norms about the social behaviors and obligations of men and women. Often, social status and expectations are imbued on these roles [23]. Stressors, such as job loss, can cause role strain or stress. There are several different types of role strain, including conflict, ambiguity, overload, and incongruity [23].

Role conflict occurs when an individual's beliefs about his or her proper role and the role of a partner contradict with reality. For example, an individual who has aspired to be a stay-at-home parent who is forced by his or her partner's unemployment to return to work, becoming the main income for the family, may feel resentment, anger, and loss of identity. Role ambiguity occurs when each party has ill-defined expectations about his or her roles. Role overload is a possible reaction when expectations about roles are excessive relative to the resources available. For example, if a woman who has reluctantly returned to working outside the house is still expected to complete all or most household chores, she will likely quickly become overwhelmed and stressed. Finally, role incongruity develops when individuals' beliefs, values, and self-concepts are dissonant with role expectations.

Children

Children may also be negatively affected by parental job loss. Two theoretical frameworks can provide an understanding of how parental unemployment affects the well-being of children. The first is investment theory, which argues that job loss inevitably affects income and a family's capability to purchase resources and goods, such as food, schooling, housing, and extracurricular activities, all of which can affect a child's learning and socialization [24]. Based on this theory, lack of family income can impact a child's cognitive development. As parents experience financial challenges in providing the basic necessities, they often have to sacrifice investing in activities or resources that promote their children's personal, social, and academic development [25].

When families are taxed economically, their psychological resources will invariably be adversely affected as well. This can inhibit parental emotions and warmth, which could then lead to poorer parenting behaviors and a negative effect on children's adjustment. This is referred to as family stress theory [24]. In a study conducted of 2,998 parents with children between 5 and 17 years of age, researchers found that economic stressors were related to higher levels of parental depression, greater likelihood of receiving public assistance, and feelings of demoralization and pessimism regarding the future [26]. Parental depression was in turn related to higher frequency of harsh discipline on children, which then led to a decline in the children's psychological functioning. This is consistent with other studies that have found that increased levels of family conflict and stress and lack of social support can place children at risk for problem behaviors such as substance abuse and smoking. In a study of sixth graders, researchers found that previously nonsmoking students who had a family member lose a job had an 87% excess risk of initiating smoking in the past 30 days compared to students who did not report a family member losing a job [27].

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

Often, theories are viewed as abstract and unbeneficial in guiding day-to-day practice. The truth is that theories lay a foundation from which professionals formulate interventions, understand the etiology of the problem, and focus assessments and interventions. Therefore, reviewing applicable theories to help elucidate the relationship between physical, psychological, and mental health consequences of unemployment and job loss can be helpful (*Table 3*) [28].

Studies have found that persistent unemployment, being laid off, being downgraded, or having to leave work because of illness can affect psychological well-being. It is not only the stressors stemming from economic constraints that lead to poorer mental health, but the perceived loss of social status, self-worth, structured time, social contacts, and physical and intellectual activity that leads to declines in psychological well-being [29; 30].

Unemployment has debilitating consequences to self-esteem and self-concept. Feelings of self-doubt about one's competence, direction in life, and future possibilities are common in unemployed individuals. In a survey study of 201 unemployed adults, researchers found that self-esteem was more profoundly affected for men compared to women, despite the fact the female participants indicated they experienced greater financial deprivation [31]. The authors speculate that beliefs about money and the perception of the traditional (gendered) breadwinner role are much stronger for men. Furthermore, the study showed that the assumption of alternative social roles positively influenced self-esteem more in unemployed women than men. For example, for men to assume more responsibilities in the household did not help bolster self-esteem at all. Finally, the level of social support was related to self-esteem, again more so for women than men. Men's self-esteem was not affected by the presence of social support networks [31].

THEORIES REGARDING THE CONSEQUENCES OF UNEMPLOYMENT

Theory	Major Assumptions
Economic deprivation model	This theory focuses on the lack of financial resources that stem from unemployment. Lack of financial resources leads the unemployed to face challenges in acquiring the basic necessities of life. An intervention that stems from this theory argues for providing direct or in-kind subsidies to mitigate the economic stressors.
Control theory	This theory focuses on the control the individual perceives he/she has to master or respond to in the environment, in this case, the stressors emanating from job loss. Those with an internal locus of control look within themselves and attribute blame to themselves. Those with an external locus of control look to external or environmental factors to explain their situation. Interventions involve counseling to help clients reframe their attributions of blame and providing concrete resources to assist clients in regaining their sense of control.
Stress theories	These theories focus on the stress mechanisms triggered by a host of complex factors involving environmental stimuli (e.g., job loss), psychosocial factors (e.g., coping mechanisms, social supports, roles) and psychobiologic factors (e.g., genetic, physiologic, and biologic programming). Interventions would then focus on teaching stress management techniques.
Social support theories	These theories focus on individuals' social supports and networks and how they serve to buffer against stressors. Social supports include friends, family, neighborhoods, community, religion, and other institutional supports. Interventions guided by this category of theory focus on identifying and garnering social supports to help individuals and families mitigate stress.
Latent function model	This theory emphasizes that work is more than just a means to provide economic resources; it offers a range of "latent" functions, including structured activity, intellectual stimulation, social status, social support, and personal identity and worth. Interventions would involve psychologic counseling to explore the meanings of work for those who are unemployed.
Source: [28]	Table 3

Several studies have found an association between unemployment and depression. A 2009 study found a relationship between unemployment and levels of depression among adults 29 to 37 years of age in the United States, with a stronger correlation for men [33]. Being unemployed and seeking work and out-of-the-labor-force status (defined as out of work but not seeking work) were significantly associated with depressive symptoms in adults after controlling for demographic factors, current socioeconomic status, family background, and prior depressive symptoms. Another study with 88 adults recruited from two employment agency centers found similar relation-

ships between unemployment and depression; however, authors of this study isolated the variable of resilience in buffering against depression [34]. Their findings showed that the longer individuals were job searching, the more likely they were to experience depression. Individuals who were unemployed but had resilient qualities, such as a strong belief in themselves and their skills, experienced less depression even if they were job searching for a longer period. In addition, research has shown a link between job loss and suicide, with longer duration of unemployment conferring the greatest risk [32].

The frustration-aggression theory has also been used to understand the relationship between unemployment and social problems such as violence and substance abuse. This theory maintains that job loss and unemployment trigger frustration because these events are believed to be barriers to one's goals and are perceived to be unfair or unjust. Antisocial behaviors, such as aggression, criminal activity, and alcohol and/or substance use and abuse, may be used to cope with this frustration [30].

The correlation between unemployment and mental health is not as straightforward as it appears, and there are many other variables that mediate this relationship, including gender, marital status, and occupational social class. In general, there are gender differences in unemployment and mental health, with unemployed men experiencing higher levels of mental health problems compared to women [29]. Marriage appears to buffer against mental health problems for unemployed women in the higher occupational social class group. However, it appears to have a reverse effect for men in the lower occupational social class group [29].

Job Loss Grief

As noted, Kübler-Ross's stages of grief have been used to understand the psychological and emotional dynamics of job loss [21]. According to this theory, individuals experiencing grief go through the following stages (though not necessarily in order):

- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

In the case of job loss, an individual who first hears about a job loss may experience shock and go through a period of disbelief or denial. A person in this stage might say, "I can't believe I am losing my job" or "I can't believe this is happening to me" [35]. Gradually, individuals might cycle to the anger stage, feeling as though they have been betrayed by the organization. These individuals may feel angry about being laid off, feel hostile toward the company, or feel furious that they have to deal with the problems associated with job loss [35]. As the anger dissipates, bargaining may be used as a coping mechanism. Individuals might attempt to reverse the termination by talking to key parties about how to reverse the process. Some individuals may feel they can bargain with the company to return to work or be given some sort of severance pay [35]. When bargaining efforts fail, sadness and depression can result. This may be mitigated by pre-existing coping mechanisms and social supports. An extra stage, exploration, may appear at this point [35]. Individuals in this stage begin to explore the potential opportunities or possibilities, possibly seeing the job loss as a positive opportunity and keeping an open mind about leaving [35]. Finally, individuals enter the acceptance stage and acknowledge (perhaps in a resigned manner) the job loss by accepting the inevitable and preparing for the transitions and changes. Again, clients may move back and forth through the stages, not necessarily following a linear path.

Research appears to support the role of job loss in grief reactions separate from experiences of depression and/or anxiety [36]. Of course, there is great variability with the experiences of job loss grief. Employees who have been at companies for longer periods, those with dependents, and those who did not anticipate unemployment and did not receive adequate notice are most likely to experience more profound job loss grief [19].

PHYSICAL HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

Researchers have found that job insecurity and unemployment have negative physiologic ramifications, including increased blood pressure and decreased body mass index [37]. Other studies have linked unemployment and markers of poor health outcomes such as self-reported physical symptoms, greater frequency in the use of medical services, mortality due to suicide, greater use of pension disability benefits, and increased use of tobacco and alcohol [38].

One of the predominant theoretical explanations for the relationship between job loss and adverse health implications is stress theory. High levels of stress impact the body in many ways, and the body responds with biologic mechanisms to deal with the stressor(s), suspending biologic activities such as immune performance, digestion, and tissue repair [39]. Another strain of stress theory views unemployment as a chronic stressor. Rather than viewing job loss as a single event and one-time stressor, job loss actually results in a whole group of stressors related to the ongoing challenges of unemployment, such as difficulties finding new employment or identifying new career paths [38]. These chronic stressors result in long-lasting health implications.

However, as with other consequences of unemployment, the relationship is complicated. It can be difficult to elucidate the feeling of insecurity stemming strictly from unemployment because job loss is intertwined with other losses, such as status, social contacts, and income [37]. Others have also questioned the actual causal mechanisms behind the relationship between unemployment and health. Because job loss triggers stressors such as financial strain, it seems clear that it would affect quality of

life, resulting in adverse health consequences. However, perhaps the opposite is true. Individuals who have poor health may be more likely to experience job loss or to obtain jobs that are unstable; therefore, they may experience a higher incidence of job loss [17]. Unemployment may also limit access to health services due to the lack of health insurance or ability to pay for health-related products or services [38]. Lack of health services could exacerbate pre-existing medical conditions, which would make finding a job that much more difficult.

As with the psychological outcomes of unemployment, a host of mediating factors affect the relationship between health and unemployment. It appears that sense of job control and self-efficacy, for example, are important contributors to the relationship between job insecurity and health outcomes. In a large survey study with 5,182 Belgian workers, researchers found that participants' perceived level of job control (i.e., the sense that one can control and have some sort of impact on their work environment) mediated the relationship between job insecurity and overall general health outcomes [40].

MEDIATORS AND CORRELATES OF UNEMPLOYMENT CONSEQUENCES

After having reviewed the social, familial, psychological, and physical consequences of job loss and unemployment, it is clear that many factors mediate the relationship between adverse outcomes and unemployment. A meta-analysis of the literature found more than 100 different variables that affect this relationship [41]. These variables are organized into five categories: work-role centrality, human capital/demographic variables, coping strategies, cognitive appraisals, and coping resources.

Work-role centrality refers to the importance attached to work and its role in defining an individual's self-worth and self-concept. Human capital refers to the potential, knowledge, and skills inherent to the individual. Examples of human capital include education, ability, occupational status, and intelligence. Demographic variables include age, marital status, number of children or dependents, gender, socioeconomic status, race, and length of unemployment. Coping strategies (which will be reviewed in greater detail later in this course), or behavioral and cognitive methods used to handle internal and external stressors, are also mediators. Cognitive appraisals are defined as an individual's interpretations or perceptions of being unemployed. This includes an individual's expectations of the job search and being employed, how the individual attributes responsibility for the job loss, and how the individual perceives the stressor (i.e., threat or challenge). Finally, coping resources are internal characteristics and external or environmental sources that can be harnessed to cope or deal with the stressors emanating from job loss [41]. Any of these factors will affect how an individual responds to job loss and the resultant consequences in his or her life.

COPING MECHANISMS AND JOB LOSS

Coping mechanisms are the strategies individuals use to deal with stressors. Several basic coping resources have been identified as useful for unemployed individuals [42].

MATERIAL RESOURCES AND SOCIAL SKILLS

Material resources are concrete assets that individuals can draw upon in times of stress, such as income, socioeconomic status, and education. In cases of job loss, saved material resources can make coping with the stress of the situation and seeking a new job easier.

Social skills, or individuals' ability to interact and relate with others, can also be helpful. In one qualitative study, researchers examined factors that promoted and hindered success in implementing job action plans [43]. One of the predominant barriers was lack of skills, including poor social skills.

PERCEIVED LEVEL OF CONTROL

Individuals' perspectives regarding hope and the direction of the future can be vehicles to manage stress. Beliefs regarding locus of control, specifically who or what has control of a situation, can influence how stress is experienced. For example, those with internal locus of control believe that characteristics, behaviors, or factors within themselves shape the direction of life events. They have strong self-efficacy and believe they can implement actions and behaviors to accomplish goals [44]. However, those with external locus of control believe that external factors, such as luck, chance, fate, and others with power, are the causes of outcomes [44]. In studies of unemployment, those who have high levels of internal control are more likely to be re-employed, while those with low levels of internal control tend to experience continued unemployment [31]. Logically, it appears that those who are employed have a greater sense of control of their lives and life circumstances while those who have had many bouts of unemployment experience feel less in control of their lives. The chronically unemployed often feel their life circumstances are random and influenced mainly by chance [45].

POSITIVITY AND CONFIDENCE

Another factor in promoting employment success is a positive attitude toward oneself. When job seekers have confidence in their skills, high self-esteem, and are involved in activities that promote good feelings (e.g., volunteer work, part-time work, exercise), they are more likely to persevere in seeking work [43].

PROBLEM-SOLVING STYLE

Problem-solving skills (e.g., analyzing situations, locating and synthesizing information, applying the information to make a decision) can be valuable in seeking and obtaining employment. There are two types of problem-solving skills: active (problem focused) and passive (avoidant or emotional based). Active problem-solving skills are strategies characterized as task-oriented, concrete, and direct. Individuals engaged in active problem solving are taking action to alter the source of stress, with the intent of producing some tangible outcome [46]. This type of problem solving is used when individuals feel something constructive can be done. Examples of active coping skills related to unemployment include [48]:

- Searching for work or starting one's own business
- Taking classes to learn new skills
- Talking with other unemployed individuals
- Structuring daily life to mimic a workday
- Networking with others to help find work

On the other hand, passive problem-solving skills and methods are indirect and targeted at reducing or managing the emotional distress triggered by a stressful event [46]. When individuals believe a stressful situation must be endured or persevered rather than overcome, they are more likely to use passive problem-solving skills. Passive coping skills are often characterized by self-blame, rumination, and resignation. Examples of passive (or avoidant) coping skills related to unemployment include [48]:

- Avoiding thinking about various work options
- Avoiding being seen by others
- Keeping worries related to unemployment to oneself
- Blaming oneself

Studies have shown that educational attainment is correlated with the different types of problem solving. A survey study with 1,639 Danish men and women who had been unemployed for at least 70% of the previous 3 years found a relationship between low educational attainment and low use of active problem-solving skills [48]. When taking gender into account, men with lower educational attainment had higher use of passive or avoidant coping skills, and women with medium levels of educational attainment had lower use of avoidant coping skills.

SOCIAL SUPPORT

Social support is a multidimensional concept defined by sources of affective, emotional, instrumental, and informational assistance. When individuals feel supported, they feel more empowered to deal with the stressors resulting from job loss. A social support system can provide information or advice that increases the likelihood of using more active problem-solving skills [49].

Social support networks may include friends, family, neighbors, coworkers, and other individuals who provide mutual comfort and assistance. Social support can be viewed in objective or subjective terms. Objectively, one can count the frequency of contact or size of social support, while subjectively, the focus is on the perceived quality of the support. Subjective measures of social support are better predictors of psychological well-being in times of stress than objective measures [50].

JOB SEARCH BEHAVIOR AND STRATEGIES

A job search is broadly defined as the specific behaviors individuals engage in to obtain information about the labor market regarding available jobs and alternatives [51]. Job search behaviors may follow one of many possible paths [52].

If a job seeker follows a systematic and linear series of steps from start to finish, this is referred to as the sequential model. These job seekers begin with a planning stage followed by active and intense search strategies. According to the sequential model, those who go through the job search stage but who remain unemployed will return to the earlier stages to begin again.

The learning model assumes that, over time, job seekers learn which strategies work and which are not effective. For example, individuals may determine that informal job sources are most effective, as not all jobs that are open are formally posted. According to this model, people will modify their job search to accommodate more effective techniques.

Job seekers experience high levels of anxiety, stress, and other negative emotions that can cause them to decrease or cease their job search regardless of how effective or ineffective they have been. This is known as the emotional response model. Many job seekers will experience enough frustration that they will search with less intensity or use more informal sources. Improved coping skills can be helpful for these types of searchers.

The process of searching for a job has also been framed as a self-regulatory process guided by individuals' goals [54]. This model defines a job search as a "purposive, volitional pattern of action that begins with the identification and commitment to pursuing an employment goal" [54]. The employment goal, in turn, activates search behavior designed to bring about the goal.

JOB SEARCH STRATEGIES

In order to understand the different types of job search strategies, it is important first to understand the potential sources of information regarding job opportunities. Job sources are generally categorized as either formal or informal [55]. Formal sources are public venues advertising job leads, such as job postings in newspapers or magazines, online job sites, employment agencies, and career placement centers. Informal sources are private mediators that can provide job leads, including family, relatives, friends, networks, and employees at a target organization.

It is not surprising that the most common job lead sources are formal. This is the most simple and accessible route, and consequently, individuals are more likely to resort to this venue. A study of university undergraduates found that 70% of the study participants utilized advertisements as the primary source of job leads, while 45% used more informal means [56]. Participants with a greater number of social resources (e.g., family, friends, connections) were more likely to employ informal sources for job leads [56]. When businesses or employers were asked how they obtain their candidates, 40% of referrals were categorized as informal and 28% came from job advertisements [57].

Job-seeking behaviors may also be described according to the level of directness. Focused job search strategies involve identifying specific types of jobs one desires based on skill sets and interests, then targeting a small number of employers that fit the criteria. Focused job searchers tend to persevere until they obtain the job they want [58]. On the other hand, haphazard job search strategies do not have a specific focus. Job seekers using these strategies are receptive to jobs that are outside their areas of study, skills, competencies, and long-term professional/vocational goals. These individuals want or need a job more desperately and will use a trial-and-error approach, switching job search strategies several times [58]. Those who use haphazard job search strategies tend to obtain employment more quickly

than those using other job search strategies because they are more likely to accept the first job offered. In the middle of this continuum are exploratory job search strategies. Individuals using these strategies pool their job options and gather a range of information from family, friends, and previous employers. They have in mind the type of job they want but will remain receptive to other alternatives [58].

STAGES OF JOB SEARCH

As with job loss grief and the stages individuals experience when they first lose their job, job searching may also follow a stage-like process with four phases [20]:

- **Enthusiasm:** The individual embarks on the job search with enthusiasm after accepting that he/she must begin the process of looking for a job. This stage is marked by hope and optimism in locating a challenging and interesting job.
- **Stagnation:** The job seeker enters this stage when the initial enthusiasm wanes, usually due to lack of progress. If after submitting online applications and résumés, going to job fairs, and sending out résumés, the job seeker does not hear back from any employers, anxiety and concern ensues.
- **Frustration:** During this stage, the job seeker becomes frustrated and begins to decrease job searching activities.
- **Apathy:** At this stage, hopelessness and depression set in. The individual usually completely disengages from the job search process.

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE JOB SEARCH BEHAVIOR

The goals of the individual dictate the type of job search strategy used. In a study of highly educated (minimum of a Master's degree), employed Europeans, researchers found that job search goals rather than job satisfaction determined which search strategies were used [59]. Not surprisingly, individuals who were actively seeking a job because of potential layoffs had more active goals and were more likely to use all six of the job search methods examined (i.e., looking at job ads, visiting job sites, networking, contacting agencies, contacting employers, and submitting applications). On the other hand, those who merely wanted to stay informed about the job market used more passive job search strategies, such as reviewing ads and visiting websites. Again, those without action-oriented goals were more likely to use passive search strategies. Job seekers who were motivated to develop and maintain a professional network were guided by strategies that involved human contact and developed those relationships (e.g., networking and contacting employers) [59].

Another factor that affects job search behavior is the duration of unemployment and the psychological well-being of the job seeker. Research indicates that individuals experiencing longer periods of unemployment are more likely to lose motivation and are less engaged in the job search process. These individuals have been referred to as the "scarred worker" [60]. The lives of "scarred workers" are disrupted on multiple fronts (e.g., family, social, economic), and their personal and vocational/professional identities are also threatened. Consequently, their problem-solving skills and self-esteem are similarly affected [60]. This then adversely impacts job searching abilities and motivation.

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN JOB SEEKING

There is no doubt that technology has impacted how individuals search for jobs. In a 2009 study with 2,253 American adults (18 years of age and older), the Pew Internet and American Life Project examined how the Internet was used to cope with the recession. The researchers found that 9% of users of the Internet every day were looking for jobs online [61]. Respondents indicated they also used the Internet to locate information about how to improve their skills in order to qualify for jobs. This trend was greatest for young adults between 18 and 29 years of age [61].

One of the advantages of searching for employment via the Internet is the ease, convenience, and amount of information accessible for free or for a relatively nominal fee. However, many job seekers assume that posting their résumés, completing online applications, and waiting for a response will be sufficient [62]. In fact, multiple job search strategies should be employed along with the Internet in order to fully maximize its effectiveness [62].

More individuals are using social networking sites for personal and professional purposes as well. In 2014, 52% of adults (18 years of age and older) in the United States used social networking sites [63]. As of 2021, 72% of the adult public used at least one form of social media [70]. The most popular social networking site is Facebook, and 69% of adult social network users have a Facebook account. In addition, up to 40% of adult users have an Instagram account, 28% have a LinkedIn account, and 23% have a Twitter account [70]. In general, well-educated people, with college degrees or higher, use social networking sites more than those with a high school education or less, and there are slight gender differences in use, with 66% of men using social media compared with 78% of women. An estimated 84% of adults 18 to 29 years of age, 81% of adults 30 to 49 years of age, and 74% of adults 50 to 64 years of age are social networking users. The greatest increase in Internet

users is among those age 65 years and older, with 45% of people aged 65 and older use some form of social media in 2021 [63; 70].

Using social networking sites can be a very powerful and focused way to network. Instead of merely showing up to a job fair or a networking event and hoping to meet someone who may be helpful professionally, job seekers can use social networking sites to actively search for and connect with people in specific companies who can potentially refer them to other insiders. Furthermore, social networking sites can be used effectively for job searching purposes if they are viewed as a vehicle for personal branding [64]. Social networking sites such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and Ning can be used to create a professional identity and convey professional goals.

Just as social networking sites can be used to create a positive image, job seekers should be very cautious in how much personal information they reveal about themselves online, including anything that might negatively impact their “brand.” The casual and informal nature of social networking can cause people to inadvertently cross boundaries that could affect their professional identity. Not everyone considers how the image or persona they present online will be perceived in the future. The Internet is a public forum, and certain behaviors may be too personal, intimate, and/or embarrassing to share with potential employers [65]. In a 2010 study, 148 students were recruited to evaluate fictitious job candidates based on their résumés and social networking profiles [66]. Participants were randomly assigned to résumés that depicted an applicant that was either marginally or highly qualified for the job. Social networking profiles conveyed an image of the candidate being professional (photo of an individual in a suit), family-oriented (photo of an individual at a football game), or alcohol-oriented (photo of an individual holding a beer can in each hand). Not surprisingly, the résumés influenced the evaluations of the job candidates, but images conveyed in the social networking sites also influenced assessments. The candidates with family-oriented and professional-

oriented photos on the social networking sites were rated as more suitable for the job and regarded as more conscientious than those with alcohol-oriented photos. They were also more likely to be called in for interviews and offered higher salaries.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS: THE ROLE OF THE HELPING PROFESSIONAL

FACILITATORS OF SKILLS IDENTIFICATION

When individuals become unemployed, they may begin to question their identities. They revisit who they are, what they are good at, what their skills are, and where their professional interests lie. Assisting clients in identifying their skills and determining which skills are transferable to different sectors becomes increasingly crucial, as the job search process can prove frustrating if clients cannot clearly specify their skills and what they can offer to employers [11]. Practitioners become facilitators, assisting clients in answering questions such as:

- What are my skills and interests?
- How do I gain new skills or sharpen current skills?
- How do I market my skills?
- What jobs fit my skills?

Traditionally, the popular book *What Color Is Your Parachute?* has been used to help clients identify marketable skills and professional interests [11]. Today, there is a tremendous amount of information available online as well. Depending on the client and his or her confidence in using technology, the practitioner and client may access the online information together. Practitioners can explore possible skills and interests with clients using web tools. The following websites may be helpful adjuncts for practitioners helping clients identify job and professional skills, competencies, and interests:

- Gaston University Virtual Career Center: <https://www.gaston.edu/counseling-career-development/career-counseling/virtual-career-center>
- O*NET Resource Center, a collaboration of the U.S. Department of Labor/Employment and Training Administration and the North Carolina Employment Security Commission: <https://www.onetcenter.org>

Practitioners helping clients identify their strengths and skill gaps should progress beyond gathering information [11]. If practitioners stop here, clients may feel overwhelmed and unsure of the next step necessary to fill any identified gaps. Clients should be referred to necessary services, such as training programs, vocational and educational workshops, and/or government assistance programs, to facilitate progression in the job search.

CAREER INFORMATION PROVIDERS

When individuals lose their jobs, some will become paralyzed with fear, indecision, and self-doubt. Those who may have some idea of what type of work interests them but are unfamiliar with the field's employment trends, wage/salary trends, and education and skills required may be guided to locate this information online. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) publishes the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (OOH), which can be accessed online at <https://www.bls.gov/ooh>. The OOH reflects BLS employment projections for the 2021–2031 decade and provides information regarding hundreds of occupations. The BLS also provides employment projections by occupation and industry. This information can be accessed online at <https://www.bls.gov/emp>.

Another resource is the American Job Center's Career One Stop, which is an online collaboration between the U.S. Department of Labor and the U.S. Department of Education. The site can be accessed at <https://www.careeronestop.org>. Here, clients can explore careers, find information about the education and training they might need, learn how and where to search for jobs, and find state and local help. The site also provides a variety of resources specifically targeted to entry-level workers, those wishing to change careers, older workers, students, workers who have been laid off, and veterans seeking employment. Practitioners may offer to walk clients through the website. After the desired information is accessed, practitioners can discuss how well the client believes he/she would enjoy the selected occupation, what additional education or training are needed, and skills and knowledge that must be acquired.

RÉSUMÉ ADVISORS

Although many practitioners are not career counselors per se, they still may assist clients with practical job search skills such as résumé writing. Practitioners may review the basic structure of a résumé, refer clients to online sites that offer tips about résumé writing, and quickly review résumés. When reviewing résumés, practitioners can ask simple, practical questions [68]:

- Are there spelling and grammatical errors?
- Are objectives written in a manner targeted to a specific job?
- Are objectives written in a way that indicates what the job seeker can offer to employers (employer-focus) rather than what the job seeker desires (self-centered focus)?
- Are specific skills mentioned?

Practitioners can also refer clients to career websites that offer résumé writing and coaching services. These services may require a fee, which varies from company to company. If used, the client may submit information, including demographics, work history, professional experiences, skills, and other relevant facts, which is then used to develop a résumé [69]. In addition to the traditional print résumé, video résumés are also becoming more common. Many online career sites offer tips about video production, and some offer video production services [69].

TEACHING COPING SKILLS

As discussed, anxiety and stress are common psychological responses in those who are unemployed or facing job insecurity. Practitioners can assist clients in coping with their anxieties and stress using a variety of techniques. There is a growing body of literature on mind-body interventions, such as mindfulness-based stress reduction techniques, and these tools can be used by clients to deal with anxiety [67].

Mindfulness interventions are viewed as the “third wave” of cognitive-behavioral therapy, incorporating principles of yoga and meditation [53]. Mindfulness is defined as a “type of intentional consciousness, awareness, or a way of being attentive in the present moment that can be learned through meditation” [67]. Through meditation, clients can be taught to deal with anxiety-laden thoughts about unemployment with awareness and acceptance.

Practitioners can use mindfulness techniques when their clients appear stuck with their anxious thoughts related to unemployment [67]. For example, a client may be stuck at the stagnation or frustration stage of the job search process [20]. If a client submits a tremendous number of résumés and attends job fairs but receives few responses, he or she will likely grow increasingly anxious, continually thinking a job will never come. In this case, mindfulness techniques can assist the client to shift away from anxious, paralyzing thoughts [67].

There are also other, more traditional relaxation and stress management techniques available to cope with anxiety [34]. Cognitive-behavioral interventions focusing on reducing negative thoughts and substituting more realistic positive thoughts, using solutions-focused methods such as role playing for interviews, and implementing and scheduling specific action plans for job searching can empower clients who are plagued with self-defeating beliefs and thoughts [34].

CONCLUSION

Unemployment can result in a wide range of biopsychosocial ramifications. Due to financial constraints and changes in daily structure, lifestyles can alter dramatically. The most obvious consequences are financial; however, unemployment has psychological implications as well. In Western society, employment is often symbolic of one's identity and social status. If judgments are made about an individual's relative worth based on his or her income and job prestige, job loss can be emotionally and psychologically painful [47]. These effects can extend to the family as well. Studies have shown that in households in which husbands are unemployed or underemployed, marital tension and strife are increased. Family roles may shift as the breadwinner role is subsumed by another family member. Children may witness and feel tension and anxiety. Parenting behaviors are also affected, as fathers who experience economic constraints due to unemployment demonstrate fewer nurturing behaviors toward their children.

In the current economy, counselors may play a role in encouraging job seekers to be creative in finding sources of income. Job seekers might consider several part-time jobs or freelance projects, take on teaching opportunities, or offer to be an intern or an apprentice for a desirable company [47]. Not only do these venues potentially offer income, but just as importantly, they give the job seeker structure and a sense of purpose.

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