



Your Career: Talking to a jobless friend

Often 'survivors' don't know what to say, worry they could be next

By Eve Tahmincioglu

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Trudy Schuett has been out of work for nearly a year, and she's sick of everyone asking: "Did you find a job yet?"

Lately she's been getting this question from her online buddies and even casual acquaintances. "I've got a brother who phones fairly frequently, and that's usually his first question," she says. "My minister was asking for a while, but I think he picked up on the fact that if I had something to report, I would."

Schuett, whose last gig was as a field representative for a federal government agency, can't help her frustration. Her job search has been a bear. She's sent out hundreds of resumes and checks postings every day on Indeed.com, CareerBuilder.com, her local paper and Craigslist. For a while, she was even cold-calling new businesses in town.

"I tell myself they mean well, and are trying to express their concern, but I'd like to have some areas of life where I'm not reminded of looming poverty or maybe my own incompetence," says Schuett, who lives in Yuma, Ariz.

With unemployment across the nation at a 15-year high and so many people losing their jobs, one of the most difficult challenges is figuring out what to say to out-of-work friends and family.

Alas, there's no how-to manual on dealing with the jobless. But psychologists and career experts say it's a lot like the etiquette we use when someone has lost a loved one. The unemployed may go through many of the same stages as people in mourning, including denial or possibly even depression.

What to say to your unemployed friend

Jackie Brook, a publicist for AMP3 Public Relations, heard about her good friend's layoff from a luxury car dealership after her buddy posted it on Facebook.

"That's the only way she'll really communicate since she's embarrassed and ashamed," she surmises.

"She and I haven't had a chance to talk," Brook adds, "because I won't send her an 'I'm sorry' message via a social networking site. I think it's had a negative impact on our relationship, as I believe that she now thinks that I don't care, which is not the case. As such, we still haven't spoken, and she won't pick up my calls."

Indeed, the proliferation of social networking sites and e-mail have added yet more complexities to an already sticky situation.

So what do you do when you're dealing with someone who's been laid off? Do you give them advice at a cocktail party? Tell them it will all be okay as they're walking out of their office or plant with box in hand? Should you text them words of encouragement? Or should you just leave them alone?

"The main challenge in this situation is that most of us project onto the laid-off person how we'd feel if we were laid off," says Karen Romine, a psychotherapist in Santa Monica, Calif. "In most cases, this means we see them as a helpless victim who's in real trouble. The truth is, while it's a setback, it's not nearly as bad as we tend to think."

The 'survivor syndrome'

What may be at play in this situation is something called the "survivor syndrome," says Holly G. Green, owner of management consulting firm The Human Factor. Sometimes people who still have jobs feel guilty and also worry that they could be next, she says. Those feelings could negatively impact your relationships with

unemployed friends.

Suddenly you're just two sad sacks wallowing in bad vibes, and that helps no one.

But, Green adds, don't go overboard raving about how great your life is when you meet up with a friend at a Christmas party and discover he or she has lost their job.

You can share the fact that you're going on a vacation or just got a promotion, she says, but also acknowledge what they're going through. "Say 'I'm sorry.' Offer them support, and be specific."

If your laid-off friend likes to communicate on a social networking site, it's OK to use that technology. Although some believe the phone is preferable, e-mail also is acceptable. Understand that your friend might have a lot going on, so don't take it personally if he or she doesn't respond right away.

You should also set helping limits.

"Don't be an ATM," warns career expert Nicole Williams, author of "Earn What You're Worth."

"You should also never give them money hoping, and maybe even secretly expecting, that you'll be paid back. This may never happen," she says. "Assume that anything you help them with, from buying them a beer to a small sack of groceries, is a gift. But don't worry — the karma gods will reward you someday."

And never, ever ask them if they found a job yet.

"I'd say, 'Let's talk about something else. Anything else,' " pleads out-of-work Schuett.

"Friends and family have a brilliant opportunity to offer their job seeker a haven away from the nagging concern," she adds. "Let us know we're still valued for something else."

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