**Coping with Layoff Survivor Sickness**



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You’ve survived a round of layoffs (or two or three) at work. So why do you feel as bad as if you’d been laid off yourself?

You might be suffering from what author and consultant David Noer calls “layoff survivor sickness,” a toxic blend of anger, survivor guilt, fear and anxiety that can cause sleepless nights, sinking morale and plummeting productivity. ”It’s the same process people go through when they survive car crashes,” says Noer, author of [*Healing the Wounds: Overcoming the Trauma of Layoffs and Revitalizing Downsized Organizations*](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/asin/0470500158/monstercom). Many sufferers of layoff survivor sickness might even be clinically depressed and could benefit from professional treatment, Noer adds.

Here are eight practical tips from Noer as well a mental health counselor and layoff survivor on overcoming layoff survivor sickness:

**Remain Calm**

When layoffs hit, the immediate reaction of those left behind is often panic. Overcome this panic and anxiety by developing a plan for what you’d do [if you got laid off](http://career-advice.monster.com/job-search/Getting-Started/Eight-Ways-to-Respond-to-a-Layoff/article.aspx), too. That’s what Lisa Jo Lampi, a media analyst for an advertising agency in the Twin Cities, did when the first of three rounds of layoffs hit her company. Lampi and her husband discussed how they could cut their household budget and where they could find [alternate health insurance](http://career-advice.monster.com/salary-benefits/benefits-information/health-insurance-options-unemployed/article.aspx). She also evaluated her skills and investigated other jobs -- both in and out of her field -- for which she’d be qualified. “It’s like crisis preparedness or emergency management -- only for yourself,” she says. “Having a plan means that if and when [a layoff] happens to you, you’ll feel less of a sting and more in control.”

**Recognize That Survivor Guilt Is Normal**

Your boss and even your friends and family may tell you how fortunate you are to still have your job, but layoff survivors feel anything but lucky. Lampi worked side-by-side for a month with several people who knew they would be losing their jobs. “It mentally took a toll,” she says. “I lost sleep, I lost my appetite.” Lampi was plagued by other questions, too, especially why she was spared while others lost their jobs. Such survivor guilt is common, Noer says, and it won’t help to deny or internalize the pain. Allow yourself to grieve the loss of your colleagues and your sense of stability, he says.

**Talk It Out**

Keeping your grief and frustration bottled up is a recipe for trouble, and it’s not a sign of weakness to vent your feelings. “You’re not the Lone Ranger,” Noer says. “If you don’t let it out, you won’t get better.” Sandra Tobin, a licensed mental health counselor in Fort Wayne, Indiana, encourages layoff survivors to surround themselves with positive, supportive people. [Office gossip](http://career-advice.monster.com/in-the-office/workplace-issues/gossiping-on-the-job-hurt-you/article.aspx) with excessively [negative colleagues](http://career-advice.monster.com/in-the-office/workplace-issues/5-ways-stay-positive-in-negativity/article.aspx) is unproductive and will only make you feel worse, she says.

**Be Honest and Efficient**

Layoff survivors usually end up with heavier workloads, which can take their toll on even the best employees. Lampi had a heart-to-heart talk with her employer, because she was concerned about the consequences of her higher workload. “I said, ‘I’m extremely grateful for this position, but I want you to know my error rate may be higher,’” she says. To stay on top of her work, Lampi has eliminated distractions from her work environment and is more likely to schedule meetings rather than discuss work issues spontaneously with colleagues who stop by.

**Unhook Your Self-Esteem from Your Company**

You’ll bounce back from layoff survivor sickness quicker if you find self-esteem in the type of work you do rather than where you do it. Noer calls this “breaking organizational codependence,” and it means that you should find a sense of value and purpose in your profession rather than in your company. “Place your self-esteem in your own hands and not your organization’s hand,” he says.

**Empower Yourself**

On a related note, layoff survivors should develop [transferable skills](http://career-advice.monster.com/resumes-cover-letters/Resume-Writing-Tips/Change-Careers-Transferable-Skills/article.aspx). Being proactive about your professional development -- whether by taking a community-education course, ramping up your [professional networking](http://career-advice.monster.com/job-search/professional-networking/networking-tips-build-it-before-you-need-it/article.aspx) or exploring alternate income sources -- is always a good idea, Tobin says, but especially when your employer is downsizing. Noer agrees. “It’s not disloyal to look after yourself,” he says. “If you have skills other companies want, your company will want to keep you.”

**Manage Your Stress**

Practice your best [stress-management techniques](http://career-advice.monster.com/in-the-office/Workplace-Issues/Stress-the-Positive/article.aspx) after-hours, and [keep your life in balance](http://career-advice.monster.com/in-the-office/work-life-balance/do-you-have-work-life-balance/article.aspx). Avoid watching the news or disturbing movies if they put you in a bad mood. Maintain your [exercise routine](http://career-advice.monster.com/in-the-office/work-life-balance/Fit-Fitness-into-Your-Workday/article.aspx), Tobin says. Keep busy and avoid isolating yourself, but incorporate quiet time to reflect on the good things about your life. “People who have the capacity to find an ‘attitude of gratitude’ even in the midst of trouble move to the other side of grief more quickly,” Tobin says.

**Maintain Perspective**

If layoff survivor sickness is incapacitating or you’re being dramatically [overworked](http://career-advice.monster.com/in-the-office/work-life-balance/tame-the-never-ending-workweek/article.aspx) with no respite in sight, quit your job. “I’ve talked to people who are laid off and found a better life outside, and they feel guilty because their friends are still stuck,” Noer says. “That teaches people that when you are terminated you really don’t die.... Your life is not your job.”