

Why Is It so Hard to Be out of Work? by Rose Jonas, Ph.D.

Unless you work out of a union hall or in an industry where it's expected and your next job is only a phone call away, losing your job is one of the most debilitating things that can happen to you. Your identity is shaped by who you love, who loves you, and by what you do for a living. Take away the work and you feel pained and all at sea.

There are simple reasons why you feel so bad, and they exist apart from the fear about being without money. A job gives you something that all but a few of us need: a place to go each day, a structure, a way to feel accomplished, people, a measure of security. The few who don't need that can succeed as entrepreneurs.

When you are out of work, you have no place to go. You wander around your house, which feels unfamiliar in the quiet weekday light. When you get up, there's nothing you have to do. Before, you knew what doors to unlock, what papers to shuffle, what phone calls to make. Job hunting territory feels foreign to you, and because you don't know how long or what this takes, you don't know what counts for accomplishment. Is three phone calls good? Can I be proud of sending out 100 resumes?

You've lost the *kibbitz* club, the people around with whom you visit or work. If you were an executive, there's no one to get your coffee or type your letters (yeah, some people still have that luxury).

The feeling of security you had wasn't real because no one is ever more than a few mistakes or boss changes away from being fire-able. But now, with even that stripped away, you feel it keenly, especially if your piggy bank didn't have a rainy day compartment.

When you are confused, lonely, and afraid, you cannot do a good job at the job search. It's as if life is standing in front of you making exorbitant demands for your best attention, but waving an annoying hand in front of your face and chanting, "Na-nee-na-nee-na-nee." It's tough to get past that, but you have to.

The following suggestions sound ridiculous to those who keep their job search at arm's length, who stay in pain and confusion instead of gritting their teeth, determined to get this done.

1. *You just have to call forth the can-do coach within you.* You need to find the spirit to win this game, and you have to do it every morning. Florine Mark, President and Chairman of the Board of Weight Watchers, starts each day with the same omigod blues we all have, but she doesn't stay there. She literally drags out the winner inside her. She stands before her bathroom mirror and says over and over, "You're great. You can do this." She says it till she believes it. It works.

One of my clients, a real estate agent, listens to motivational tapes on her morning walk. She picks out one thing to work on each day.

2. *Give yourself a place.* Your best bet is if you can actually go someplace everyday. It means something to most people. They like the routine of getting dressed and heading out. Being at home is an invitation to distraction. Vacuuming actually seems like an attractive necessity. Your bed is way too inviting.

Can a friend lend you an office for the two to four months of your job search, or a basement room with access to a phone? Does your church have unused space?

If not, then set up an area in your home that can be your undisturbed "office." Put a screen around a corner desk and carry your cordless phone there. Move around boxes in your basement. Clear out a closet and set up your PC.

Whatever your space is, please follow these guidelines: Take everything you need there (phone book, file folders, stationery, address book) and leave it there. Stay here throughout the day, and leave it in the evening. You want to "go to work" each morning and "come home" each night. If your home office is the dining room table, you never leave the office, and the sight of a discouraging day's efforts can be depressing to everyone. You need a space to call your own.

3. *Give yourself a structure.* You now have the unfortunate ability to determine your work day. Forget the empowerment stuff you've read. Most of us actually prefer having structure imposed on us, so we know what we have to do. It's easier than deciding. Once you say what it will be, stick to it.

Should looking for work be a full-time job? The books say yes, I say probably not. My clients have almost always gone through months of strain before getting their supports kicked out from under them. They and their families have gone through enormous upheaval.

They may have refused to cry, squared their shoulders and put together a macho plan that calls for a constant nose to the grindstone, but they find time gets frittered away. They have long lunches with friends and call it networking. They spend mornings doing volunteer work. The most enticing is if they're volunteering for the job club they belong to. (They should be helping others in the same boat, shouldn't they?) They linger over coffee. They go see their therapist. They wonder why this job search is taking so long.

Having seen this happen many times has made me smarter. They usually need to look at the pain they're in, to acknowledge they're trying to draw from a dry well, to set up a schedule that both gets the job done and gives them a break. My clients are more successful if they'll commit to a four-day, 25-30 hour work week and take one "vacation" day every week. They might not have had one and won't get one for months once they start the new job.

They'd better replenish themselves now so they don't go to the new place with the exhausted resentment they carry on their hearts. Play golf. Take a long weekend with the family. Play cards Thursday night. But be at the desk or on the road to some real appointment between 9:00 AM and 4:00 PM Monday through Thursday.

This attitude makes even the most sympathetic spouse crazy. "Why are you not hitting it 65 hours a week? It's a numbers game. The more time you put in, the faster you'll find a job." It would be nice if the job search worked that way, but it doesn't. If you have the energy, fine. If you're wounded, as people often are, give yourself a more realistic schedule. You probably can't explain it to your well-meaning spouse. Just do it.

4. *Give yourself a wardrobe.* Your work clothes are the costume you don for your job role every day. It matters what you wear while you're job hunting, though people succeed with different approaches.

Many entrepreneurs who work from home dress up every day: gray suit, white shirt (and heels and pearls and make-up if you're a woman). They believe they can only project a professional image if they look upscale and business-like.

At the other extreme are those who wouldn't touch a tie or panty hose. They grow pony tails and live in jeans or sweats, toiling at their millions, fist defiantly shaken at the button-down mentality that had held them prisoner for so long. They work harder, more creatively when their bodies are comfortable.

Whatever your value is, establish and keep to your home office dress code. What costume will best assist your focus on work? Business casual, that happy medium of comfort and style? You know you're here to work rather than clean the garage, but you're not sausaged into a vest.

5. *Get real about your probable time out of work.* Few people bounce on their keisters, reach for the phone and log on to their new boss' computer system the next day.

While this is a numbers game, few people can run the numbers in less than two months. The time ranges, on average, from four to six months. The more specialized your job, the higher your salary goal, the more scattered your efforts, the more tired you are, the longer it will take.

Keep a wary eye on that six-month mark. No matter how hard you work, you'll start running out of ideas and steam then. Discouragement laps menacingly at your feet. You will have to re-think your career goals and strategies.

If a year passes, psychological wear-down settles in. If you're still looking at two years, then you have a serious and permanent problem. You often see at job clubs people who have been out of work more than a few months. They have become heavily involved in leading the organization, cheerleading others. Why are these competent people still looking? I often find one of two things: (a) They had a life partner who had been a significant career booster who got tired of managing this career and went away. If they don't find a replacement, their career will wilt like a gardenia blossom in July. (b) They had almost unbearable stress in their previous job. Their unemployment will last almost exactly as long as their stressful time. Eighteen months of strain? They'll have 18 months of job hunting. It's uncanny; it's sad to watch. It's why I tell people to take Fridays off. It shortens the search.

6. *Analyze yourself and your situation.* Who are you and what do you want? The same job or something different? What are you good at? What are your selling points? How long can you afford to be out of work? Who do you know (and twirl that Rolodex 'round and 'round) who can be helpful to you? Who do you need to know, and who can introduce you? Are there ads in the paper for the job you want? Is there a place you just know needs your help? How can you get in? Should you see a headhunter? Few people should, but many think so. What kind of library or Internet research do you need to do? (If you're not computer and Net savvy, this had better get on the work plan.) Do you need a new resume?

These are not inconsequential questions. You could spend your first looking-for-work week just sorting through them.

7. *Organize your out-of-work schedule.* You are now the product being marketed, not the dog food or cellophane tape you promoted. You need goals, action plans, timelines, and markers.

When you're a new entrepreneur, no one tells you what goals to have. When you're eventually selling product or writing winning proposals, you have a measure, but how do you know on a daily basis that you're doing what you're supposed to do?

You decide and you do it. You write a longer term goal. Each month you decide what you can get done on it, each week you lay out what you want to accomplish, and each day you make a list of what to do today.

You can't skip this thought process. If you do, you will have wasted, listless days. What good is it if you send 100 resumes with 100 "Dear Sir or Madam" letters to 100 consecutive newspaper ads?