

Getting Fired

By Rose Jonas, Ph.D.

I am so sorry this happened to you. You walked in this morning and got a call to see the boss. The cold roller-coaster dip your stomach took was your tip-off that nothing good would come from this trek down the hall. Now you sit in your car outside the building, an employee no more. Fired. Stripped of your 9 to 5 identity, with your cardboard box of discarded contributions sitting on the seat next to you. Fired.

You will mostly keep on a game face for everyone, maybe even your spouse who will worry about how soon you can replace the income. You'll tell varying shades of the truth about restructuring, mergers, discrimination or bad chemistry. You'll act hopeful, upbeat. But your ego has taken a wallop to the middle and is retching on the parking lot. It can be one of your life's cruelest blows. It has nothing to do with your competence or whether you'll find another job or make enough money. This knife slices to the core of your self-confidence and, like deep wounds, takes a long time to heal.

What should you do? How should you manage? What will you tell people? Why did this happen?

1. Why? In a few weeks or months you may be more able to face the "firing" truth. Statistics say [whose?] that the main reason people get fired is incompetence. That ain't so. In many cases, it wasn't performance. The employer just didn't want you anymore: The new boss didn't like you. the organization was in turmoil and rejected your attempts to fix it. They wanted different ideas. The owner's son is old enough. Sometimes, though, it IS you:

You hated your job but wouldn't leave, so the organization eased you out, having sensed your rejection of IT.

You were in over your head.

You brought bad habits to your job (late, careless, too disagreeable, too much personal stuff).

It all hurts pretty much the same, no matter the reason. If it WAS you, you may have a hard time taking an honest look at behaviors you need to change; you'll be angry, defensive, blaming. If it WASN'T you, you'll feel wobbly-kneed, unself-confident, depressed.

It CAN happen that you'll feel jubilant (and this is the spin you'll probably put on it), that this is an opportunity to try something new, that you're shaking this old dead place out of your boogie soul.

2. What to do? Decide how long you need to mope. 24 hours? Three or four days? Take it. Be as sad as you are. Wallow in your misery. Sit in your bathrobe and sulk on the back porch. Take long naps with your face to the wall. Don't make networking calls. You have a bit of depression to work through. You might as well get it out of the way.

3. How to manage the hunt. Then, on the chosen day, leap from your bed of woe and get to work. If you're being outplaced, go to your new office. Otherwise, give yourself a week to organize your work-seeking life. Get office supplies. Take over the basement or an attic room or a corner of the dining room (no TVs allowed!) for your exclusive use. Scope out the weeks or months ahead and decide whether you need a fax or if Kinko's will do. New desk or a door over a couple of file cabinets? Get your benefits arranged and wrap up details from your old job. Talk with your spouse about how solid the finances are and how you need to live for now. Join a job hunter's club. Make friends with a reference librarian (they are GOLDEN at helping job seekers).

4. The search. One of the most sanity-preserving techniques will be your routine. Show up at 9:00 (wherever your “work site” will be). Leave at 5:00. If you’re at home, don’t do laundry or vacuuming or watch the baby. If you can’t ignore the hum of home, then go someplace else.

Decide what you want. A new career? Another job? If the former, add 9 to 24 months to the search process and go work on the first chapter’s exercises. If the latter, get your tool kit in order: (a) What are you looking for? Give it a name. Don’t be vague. Your friends can’t help with vague. Where? (b) What skills and experience do you bring? Have a list so you can handily recite them in an interview. (c) Why you? An employer will want to know why you’re their best choice. Be specific. (d) Where will you look? Want ads? Internet? Friends? Recruiter? (e) Who do you know? Call them. Tell them what you want. (f) Shape up your resume so you look like the job you’re seeking. (g) Start hammering the phones; set up breakfasts, lunches and interview (and set weekly goals for each). (h) Take one day off. This is hard work and you will need a psychic break.

That’s pretty much the order, but it takes awhile for most people to settle down to it. **HAVING A ROUTINE IS KEY.**

5. What to tell people. Be as honest as you can with yourself and your family. With friends, tell them the same thing you’ll tell a potential employer. Be brief, though. They love you, but they mostly hate hearing problems like. They don’t know how to help, especially when your response is “Yeah, find me a job.”

6. Potential employers? You do not destroy your career by getting fired. You DO hurt your chances if you talk about it in the wrong way. Here’s how to present it:

It was them: There was bad chemistry between my boss and me. We had a different philosophy about marketing.

It was you: I spent too much time on personal calls. The experience shook me out of that habit, but that was why.

You get points for honesty.

7. The future. You will get over this. You will be different. . . maybe less loyal, more attuned to changes in the political wind, more careful about your work habits.