

The Traumatic Impact of Job Loss and Job Search in the Aftermath of COVID-19

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Instability in the global economy in the wake of COVID-19 has resulted in millions of people losing access to employment. As a result, these same individuals will be faced with the pain of job loss in the present and the stress of the job search process in the future. This commentary seeks to draw attention to the psychological trauma that can result from job loss and job search and motivate psychologists to consider issues of work–life spillover in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Keywords: job loss, job search, unemployment, trauma, COVID-19

The incursion of the 2019–2020 novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has resulted in profoundly negative global outcomes. At the time of writing, more than 3 million people worldwide have contracted the disease, resulting in more than a quarter-million fatalities (Pettersson, Manley, & Hernandez, 2020). The human toll of the virus is clearly substantial and has rightly received most of the public attention and concern from both the research community and general public. To that end, many countries have engaged in some form of mandatory social distancing or lockdown to restrict the virus' spread (Upal, 2020). Although research suggests that these policies are effective (e.g., Lewnard & Lo, 2020), concerns have been raised as to the long-term impact of that isolation on the population at large. Mental health professionals, in particular, have expressed concern that prolonged social distancing and self-imposed quarantine may result in increased incidence of depression (e.g., Safai, 2020a), anxiety (e.g., Safai, 2020b), alcohol abuse (e.g., Sganga, 2020), and even domestic violence (see Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2020), outcomes which are each likely to result in trauma that persists beyond the outbreak of the virus itself. These discussions highlight the undeniably important role of social interaction in the human experience, and the potential trauma that can arise from prolonged separation from others.

Potentially underappreciated in these discussions, however, are the specific risks resulting from the pandemic's disruption to individuals' work-lives. As the global economy reels from the fallout of COVID-19 (see Fernandes, 2020), millions of people are losing access to employment. In the United States alone, more than

30 million adults have filed for unemployment benefits, suggesting a national unemployment rate rivaled only by that of the Great Depression (Rugaber, 2020). Moreover, economists project an impending global recession that will significantly contract the economies of many countries and place numerous industries at risk (Fernandes, 2020). These economic and employment impacts are likely to endure past the peak of the pandemic, and it may take several years for these jobs to become available once again (Berman, 2020; Martin, 2020). It is possible, therefore, that millions of people remain unable to access stable work for the foreseeable future, even after social distancing and other virus-prevention policies are relaxed.

From a psychological perspective, the human costs of this reality are likely to be substantial. Aside from the utilitarian aspect of compensation, humans are known to derive significant meaning and value from their work (Hackman & Oldham, 1985; Locke & Taylor, 1990; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Indeed, research has found that work is experienced as a source of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Hackman & Oldham, 1985), reflection of values (Kristof, 1996; Nord, Brief, Atieh, & Doherty, 1990), and expression of personal beliefs (Wrzesniewski, Dekas, & Rosso, 2009; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997) that people hold as inextricable from their self-concept (see Rosso et al., 2010). For some, the connection between their work and self is so significant that they are "called" to forgo opportunities for gains in economic or social status to pursue work that meets a need for personal significance (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Elangovan, Pinder, & McLean, 2010). Moreover, workplaces are a primary source of high-quality interpersonal interaction and relationship building for many adults (Dutton & Ragins, 2007). Research has shown that people view their workplace as a community, and use said community for psychological support and to create a sense of meaning (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

Given the significant proportion of one's adult life that is spent at work, it is reasonable to suggest that the totality of the work experience meaningfully contributes to overall psychological well-being. Indeed, research suggests that those who struggle to find and maintain employment suffer substantial psychological distress as an outcome (e.g., Dooley, Fielding, & Levi, 1996; Hamilton,

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Hoffman, Broman, & Rauma, 1993). Although the experience of losing one's job is clearly traumatic (Caplan, Vinokur, Price, & van Ryn, 1989; Price, Choi, & Vinokur, 2002) and can have spillover effects into one's life at home (see Hanisch, 1999; McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005), it is the subsequent search for a new job that poses a risk that is considered far less often. Job search is often viewed as the most practical way to alleviate the stress of job loss; only by actively seeking out new employment can one directly cope with the problem of unemployment (Wanberg, 1997). However, research has shown that the job search process itself can result in decreased psychological well-being, thus compounding an already difficult set of circumstances (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005).

The job search process is complicated and stressful, with many unemployed persons unprepared to engage in it. To that end, research has found that the likelihood of finding successful reemployment is dependent on the intensity of one's job search behaviors, which are in turn predicted by one's self-efficacy regarding the job search process (Dahling, Melloy, & Thompson, 2013; Wanberg, Kanfer, & Rotundo, 1999). Thus, to be successful in finding employment a person must believe they have the skills and abilities to do so, which is reinforced by positive experiences and damaged by negative experiences (Rife & Kilty, 1990; Wanberg et al., 1999). In circumstances of mass unemployment, wherein competition for jobs is likely to be exceedingly high, the likelihood of negative job search experiences (e.g., failed interviews) is certainly increased. Unemployed persons then either continue to look for jobs and cause themselves additional distress (see Song, Uy, Zhang, & Shi, 2009) or abandon their job search. In both instances, without the relief of new employment the risk of psychological harm is increased.

For those who remain unemployed for a substantial period, risks are increased for alcohol abuse (Dooley, Catalano, & Hough, 1992; Khan, Murray, & Barnes, 2002), depression and anxiety (Paul & Moser, 2009), and suicide (Blakely, Collings, & Atkinson, 2003; Milner, Page, & LaMontagne, 2013), among other harmful outcomes. Although research has shown that interventions can be designed and implemented to improve the job search prospects of the recently unemployed (e.g., Vuori & Vinokur, 2005), it is unlikely that such initiatives could be undertaken at the scale needed to address the current crisis. Moreover, it is also unlikely that an economic recovery of any size could reabsorb the millions of newly unemployed with any expediency. The additional fact that the majority of individuals impacted by this wave of job loss are in relatively low-paying jobs and from economically disadvantaged circumstances (Martin, 2020) increases their relative risk for these traumatic outcomes (see Khan et al., 2002; Theodossiou, 1998).

Taken together, the mass unemployment resulting from COVID-19 portends a substantial human cost beyond that of the virus itself. As millions struggle to find new work in the aftermath of the pandemic, it will be incumbent upon psychologists to recognize the immense personal and mental distress that can result from unemployment. Moreover, it will be the responsibility of the psychological community to provide perspective and guidance to both researchers and policymakers as they attempt to solve a seemingly insurmountable problem. Without such attention, these individuals and the pain of their experience may be subsumed into the broader, austere discussion of stock market returns and finan-

cial recovery; we must not be allowed to lose sight of the people behind the numbers.

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