



SURVIVING TOUGH TIMES

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HELPING CHILDREN COPE

Losing a job affects every member of a family. Adults frequently become so distracted with their own problems that they forget that unemployment has an impact on the children, both emotionally and financially. Children depend on adults for emotional security. When adults are tense, upset and inattentive, a child's security can be threatened.

Unemployment can mean sudden lifestyle changes for the whole family. There is less money to spend so decisions must be made on how to manage what is there. There may be less family time while adults look for a job.

Unemployment might mean that an adult is home more, which might call for adjusting schedules and space. It can mean that long-term family plans and goals have to be altered. The addition to the house may have to be postponed. The family vacation everyone has looked forward to may have to be canceled. Unemployment may even necessitate a move and children may be required to change schools. Children's extracurricular activities may also be eliminated due to the expense. Whatever changes unemployment brings, all family members feel the impact. Discussing the accompanying feelings and concerns is important.

Family Communication

Communication has two parts: talking and listening. Each must occur for communication to be successful. As people undergo changes in their lives, they need to

talk about it. This includes adults and children. People who deal with crisis most effectively are not ashamed to express fears and frustrations. They are able to seek help from others and to develop a support system. If children are able to learn these skills at a young age, they will be able to better deal successfully with stress as adults.

Being able to discuss and vent angry feelings can help keep those feelings from creating more severe emotional problems, family violence, or substance abuse.

Listening is just as important as talking. Everyone needs someone to listen to them - someone who supports them and allows them to express themselves. Sometimes a person can find a solution to a problem just by sharing the problem with another. The listener should not feel that he or she has to have all the answers. Just listening may be all that is needed.

Open communication within the family is essential to healthy relationships. During stress, we frequently need people outside the family willing to listen when we vent our feelings. In some families, listening is difficult because we want to help but we have strong feelings and opinions. Also, family members are sometimes too busy or preoccupied to listen well. Making the extra effort to actively listen is important.



Ideas for Better Communication

- Watch for non-verbal communication such as folded arms, fidgeting, etc. These clues can suggest a totally different meaning for what is being said.
- Use gently probing questions when you suspect something is wrong. These questions do not require “yes” or “no” answers - they seek to discover how another person feels.
- Sentences that begin with “you” can sound like accusations and this can bring your communications to a halt.
- Use “I” statements to build trust in the relationship. For example, say “I am frustrated because the carpet is still dirty. In the future, please vacuum after you have groomed the dog.”

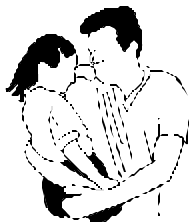
Helping Children Cope

Use the following information to help your children cope with change:

- Gain control of your own stress first.
- Help the children understand about the family’s situation in a way that is easy to grasp.
- Don’t keep the job loss a secret from the children.
- The effects of stress on children include inability to sleep, diarrhea, headaches, shouting, or withdrawal. Motivate your child to share his feelings.
- Let teachers know what is going on. Ask them to report to you if they notice that the child is having difficulty coping.

- It is important for you and your children to have a balanced diet, get enough rest, and exercise.
- Too many changes at one time can be overwhelming. Try to keep them at a minimum.
- Help children to focus on the good things. Get them to concentrate on family strengths.
- Assist your children in keeping their friendships and pursuing outside activities.
- Discuss how income loss decreases the money available for eating out, movies, and allowances.
- Talk about priorities.
- Participate in low-cost or no-cost activities such as biking, visiting places of interest that are in the community, and playing board games.
- If you feel helpless in assisting your child to handle stress, talk to a pastor or priest, school psychologist, or mental health professional.

It is important to make a conscious effort to help your children cope, even though you are under a tremendous amount of stress yourself. The better the children do, the better off the family will be.



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Surviving Tough Times is a 19-part series for individuals and families experiencing under-employment and unemployment. Originally developed by Linda Boelter, University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension Service.

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