

Stress Management for the Unemployed*

LOIS ZYKS

Assistant District Administrator, Skokie Office of Jewish Family and Community Service, Chicago

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IN an attempt to deal constructively with the increasing numbers of unemployed Jewish men and women in the Chicago and Suburban area, three Federation agencies of the Metropolitan Federation of Metropolitan Chicago combined their personnel, skills and resources to implement a unique program dealing with the physical and emotional stresses of unemployment. Jewish Family and Community Services, The Mayer Kaplan Jewish Community Center and the Skokie office of the Jewish Vocational Service have provided a program to help put more people back to work faster and increase their self-esteem and physical well-being.

The 1980s has brought about an unemployment scene unique in modern times. Unlike many other periods of job scarcity, this decade has introduced the age of the Jewish newly unemployed. These are affluent, established persons with histories of steady, productive employment. They are professional, technical, highly educated and skilled men and women who have lost their jobs because there is no longer a need for their particular skills and knowledge. It is paradoxical that these once successful people in our success-ridden society cannot now be successful in finding work.

The unemployed of the 80's are the

people least equipped to face unemployment. Nothing in their background has prepared them. Being out of work is a new, shocking and difficult adjustment. Unemployment shakes the foundations of their work ethic. The values of performance, excellence and success are not attainable without work. These individuals are facing the disillusionment and experiencing an emotional stress of a lifetime.

The 1980's also brought about the age of the computer, which in turn has introduced the phenomenon of the structurally employed. This refers to people whose jobs have been eliminated by technological advances. In these instances the person not only is out of work, his skills are also no longer necessary. Among those affected are middle-aged, middle-class, middle-managers who are college or graduate school-educated and out of work for the first time in their lives. They are generally active people who found themselves on the brink of family disruption, financial instability and personal disillusionment. Being out of work has affected areas of their interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships with varying degrees of confusion, despair, feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and financial chaos hitherto unknown to them.

By the end of 1982 JVS was so inundated with requests for services that its director began to look for creative ways of servicing this new class of clients while maintaining quality of delivery. A

*Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference of Jewish Communal Services, Los Angeles, May 28, 1984.

broad program was needed to deal with the total person and the family. The three agencies combined forces in a pilot project to fulfill this purpose.

The program had its first orientation group in February, 1983. The components of stress management were: 1. the twice weekly discussion group and 2. the physical activities section also meeting twice a week. The first members of the group were drawn from among participants in the JVS's Job Finder's program. Later, the new program was offered to clients of JFCS and the JCC, as well as to clients of JVS not in the Job Finder's program.

The screening for inclusion in the stress management group was done by representatives of JVS, JFCS and JCC. The requirements were fairly simple: the person must be (1) unemployed, (2) looking for work, (3) available for employment and (4) possessed of a fairly well integrated ego.

Group participants were encouraged to utilize both parts of the program but were not excluded from participation if they chose only one part. Active membership in the community center was not mandatory. It was agreed that stress management was an attempt to achieve the long-range goal of steady employment. Since the aim was to deal with stress and not increase it, no fee was expected for any services connected with the program.

The beginning format that has remained basically the same for over a year was open-ended, with no restrictions as to number of participants at meetings. If the number of participants consistently grew to unmanageable levels, a second group could be started. The constantly changing groupings of participants, along with shifting topics, demanded flexibility by the leaders. At the same time the group had to have movement.

The basic structure of the stress man-

agement group included leadership by a JFCS staff member joined by, but not co-led by, the Physical Education Director of the JCC. Topics were raised in the group and ranged from individual difficulties to broad unemployment problems. Because of the continual changes in the group, it became crucial to deal with concerns raised in the group at each meeting, since the composition of the group might change from meeting to meeting. At times more structure could be introduced with pre-planned topics. These topics were introduced within the group or by the leader. In retrospect, such topics generally pointed toward some knowledgeable person who could relate to these specific difficulties. Two such topics were problems of financial management while unemployed, and how to respond to certain questions in the job interview.

The philosophy underlying the stress management was to encourage activity and persistence by the individual in his efforts to deal with present anxieties and to free up energies necessary to secure meaningful employment in as short a time as possible. We also felt that if the program was to appeal to middle-managers, it must be job-focused. The payoff for participation had to be the possibility of a job. We believed that an unemployed person's energies had to be persistently dedicated to looking for work and invested in its pursuit, and that all three agencies had to support the search. With this in mind, it made sense to assure success to those who persevered religiously.

A second model of stress management was undertaken at the Northern District office of JFCS. This model at first did not include a gym component, but later was enlarged to include it. This second model recruited participants through general publicity. The requirement that they be unemployed remained the same. This model in-

cluded a limitation on the number of participants and a limit of six or seven group sessions. After a brief presentation by the leader, group participation was encouraged. One of the clear advantages of this group was its predictable structure, commitment of participants and the greater potential for group cohesiveness. On the other hand, the first model could move easily, address, open up and discuss participants' individual stresses and reach larger numbers. After one year in operation, those different advantages are still apparent in the two models.

The second major component of the earlier or first model was physical activities which, it was agreed, the JCC physical education staff would lead. In addition the very presence of the Center worker also in the discussion group vitally linked the two part program.

Unemployment and its stresses affect not only the mind, but the body as well. Poor physical education experiences in early schooling incline some persons to reluctance to exercise under even optimal conditions. Unemployment, by its nature, slows down accustomed levels of activity. As a result, there can be a decrease in the secretions of the endocrine system. It is these fluids that aid in alleviating stress and in reducing anxieties.

When the body is tense over long periods the muscular system atrophies, joints are less flexible and responses slower. Stress can affect eating and sleeping and create irregularities of the cardiovascular and intestinal systems. As a result, a person may experience more aches and pains. He may get sluggish and irritable. All this can increase susceptibility to illness and disease. It is generally accepted that specific disorders, such as ulcers, are related to emotional stress.

As stress management must be viewed holistically, physical activities had to be

in the program. The aim of the Physical Education Department was to achieve total wellness of the human being. To activate stress easing fluids, the body must build up to an aerobic situation. As a first step in achieving this, the body must increase its strength and flexibility. Cardiovascular regularity must be attained. Infrequent exercise is not enough, as a matter of fact, it is contraindicated. Knowledgeable physical education personnel must acquaint themselves with the general physical condition of the person and plan a regular program of physical exercise which includes walking, running, breathing and stretching. The pulse rate determines when an aerobic situation is achieved. This rate differs from person to person depending on age, sex and condition.

The Health and Physical Education Director* of the Mayer Kaplan JCC, supervised this program. He encouraged clients to participate actively at least three times weekly in exercises, swimming and jogging. This "play" situation and its locker-room chatter enhanced the relationship between the clients and gym personnel, which in turn increased personal disclosures and provided clients with much needed informal guidance and support.

Participants were encouraged to utilize the input of all three agencies, but the choice was left to the individual. We recognized some individuals are more inclined to discuss and others may feel more stressed if asked to disclose personal data. Others preferred not to partake of physical activity for a variety of reasons.

Of those who participated in the discussion group, some were young recent college graduates in a job search for the first time. Others were 55 years of age or older, discouraged by an ever tight-

* Mr. Glenn Anderson.

ening job market crunch. The majority had been middle-managers, middle-aged and middle-class. All were victims of staff reductions, consolidation of departments, elimination of position, computer takeover and economic pressures. They had been successful men and women and now clearly able to articulate their feelings about their job loss. For many the loss of unemployment came when they least expected it, at high points in their careers. They had been employers and top level executives with a vast range of technical and scientific knowledge. All their knowledge and skill that were once such an asset were turned into self-depreciation, guilt and depression. Finding work was the singularly most difficult job these people faced.

This first group was composed of men—most of them Jewish—aged thirty to fifty who were unemployed for more than one month, had a stable work history, were college graduates and had earned \$25,000 plus per year.

The group addressed a variety of unemployment stresses. Among these were:

1. the overall frustrations of being out of work and looking for work with little success
2. where to turn when the search ends
3. coping with finances, insurances
4. responding to family's and friend's attitudes
5. fear of rejection and its sister fear, that of success
6. changing fields and part-time work
7. fluctuations in emotional moods from lows to highs
8. selling self to an employer
9. lack of job security and job identity
10. waiting for follow-up responses to interviews (a most difficult task)

11. being unproductive in a society emphasizing performance and production
12. what to do with free time
13. coping with depression
14. incredulity it had happened to him.

In addition to techniques common to any support group, at the core of this group was the spirit of positive action and persistence and supports to self-esteem once present. Peer networking, common sense and advice passed on from one to another became a major, unexpected asset of the group.

Audio visual aids were used to enhance interviewing techniques, appearances and self-confidence in interviews. Visual viewing of the mock interviews facilitated discussion about how an interview engendered a feeling of discomfort, anger and pain.

When family members attended, feelings of isolation and helplessness became more tolerable.

After a full year of servicing this new class of Jewish unemployed, we had effectively reached 106 individuals (60% Jewish) who became active in the discussion group. Of those, 64% (67) found appropriate employment. Our statistics might actually be more favorable were we able to account for all participants who secured jobs. Typical of participants were:

Mark, a young, insecure, shabby, long-haired man of 23, plagued by depression and suicidal ideas, lost his job in a dispute with his employer. Mark was encouraged by the group to cut his hair, dress in three-piece conservative suits, preferably dark blue or grey, white shirts and a distinguished narrow tie. He was encouraged to wear a tie and black shoes, to appear clean shaven and self-assured. For experience he was encouraged to seek a less ambitious position, build up his resume and employment successes. His interviewing skills improved as he examined past unsuccessful interviews. Mark's determination to find work made him work hard at integrating criticisms from the group. Within time his gruff manner

and unkempt appearance evolved into a personable style. Mark appeared for one of the sessions in a pressed, tailored suit. He was clean-shaven and had his hair neatly combed. It was recently cut. Mark's poorly fitting, large horn-rimmed glasses were exchanged for contact lenses.

Within a short time, Mark was offered a position with a company. The salary was for less than he anticipated, but pressures from his family pushed the job as acceptable. Mark was desperate for work, was tired of the family pressures and insufficient cash. Unemployment benefits had run out.

Mark learned from the group that taking any job just to work could create more pressures and increase job dissatisfactions. He learned that an inadequate salary would only increase his depression, thus handicapping him further. After much consideration, he declined the position. Two weeks later he secured an excellent job with a good salary.

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Dan, a 36 year-old certified public accountant lost a federal position, due to cutbacks, after a tenure of many years. When Dan entered the group he was depressed, quiet and defeated. After regularly attending, Dan secured a job selling real estate after securing his license. Dan later returned to the group, an articulate, successful man.

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Jake, a 57-year-old, ex-executive, had worked for 30 years for one company. Jake was the father of three girls in college. He had some of the finest credentials and experience of all people in the group but he couldn't find a job. After searching for 12 months, Jake took a part-time job in a currency exchange. His pride necessitated his use of savings to continue financing the college costs of his three daughters. Jake was a proud man who achieved everything he ever acquired by hard work and persistence. Jake was afraid, but not of what one might

suspect. Jake was afraid to ask for a job and became paralyzed in his search. He soon learned there were others like himself. He slowly began to use the phone actively.

Since the inception of the program there have been dozens of Jakes, Dans and Marks. Sometimes they came alone, sometimes they brought spouses, a few brought children.

Conclusion

This year-long project, experimental in nature, clearly accomplished its goal. We learned a new approach to understanding and coping with a different problem of modern-day technology, the middle-class, Jewish unemployed. Those of us who worked together learned the benefits of using a variety of professional skills in a cooperative effort. We learned that the power of the individual to believe in himself and his skills can conquer anxieties and difficulties. We learned that peer support is often the key to opening up apprehensions. Each agency experienced a sense of well-being in the community. More of the far-reaching effects of the continuing program have yet to be realized.

Stress management will continue as a major project of the three agencies. Minor changes indicated by our experience will be made. A stronger emphasis on the family's role in dealing with unemployment as well as encouragement of the extended participation of the family will be among those changes. Publicity through a variety of communications will make the Chicago program available to larger numbers of Jewish people.