
Brief Report

Handling Unemployment Groups: A Group Support Model for Coping with Job Loss

Ellen Passmore, *Canadian Mental Health Association*

Losing a job is one of life's most stressful crises. Along with losing income and the security associated with it, there are the losses of identity, the social network of co-workers, life purpose, and daily structure. One of the most difficult components of unemployment is that the day and week loom ahead with no prescribed benchmarks for waking, eating, going out, etc. Decision-making and time management skills are taxed as never before. When spouse and children understandably feel anxious, insecure, and angry, it often puts strains on relationships which add to the unemployed person's stress level.

Many communities have programs which serve those who need basic life skills, or services which focus primarily on job search techniques. However, it became evident in the recession of the early 1980s that there were few services for those who had been in the workforce and had lost their jobs due to economic downturns and technological change. This was especially true for blue/white collar and middle management people, for unlike their executive and management counterparts, they rarely receive relocation counselling as part of their termination.

Given that the unemployment rate across Canada is expected to hover in the nine percent range into the 1990s, it is important for those in the counselling field to understand the emotional effects of losing a job, in order to assist those who seek personal counselling in such a crisis. In an attempt to address this problem, a support group model, Handling Unemployment Groups (HUG) was developed by the Canadian Mental Health Association/Metro Toronto Branch, with a two-year funding grant from National Welfare Grants. The model was used with sixteen groups in the Toronto area, and the program evaluation demonstrated its effectiveness. Training in the model was conducted both provincially and nationally, with 185 professional counsellors. This report will discuss the objectives and philosophy of the HUG program, psycho-social issues related to unemployment, effective ways to assist unemployed people, and the program evaluation results.

OBJECTIVES

The Handling Unemployment Support Groups model was developed to provide emotional support, as well as concrete coping tools, to those who have lost their jobs. The goal of the program was to increase confidence,

decrease stress, and minimize the self-blame often associated with unemployment. This was accomplished in support groups through a combination of methods. Communication skills, time management, stress management, relaxation techniques and job search skills were taught to participants. Group discussion was used to decrease the isolation which commonly occurs when people have lost their jobs. Participants were also given a framework in which to understand the unemployment picture so that the self-blame which they experienced could be minimized.

Underlying Assumptions

Traditional services for unemployed people fall into three categories:

1. Services focusing primarily on job search techniques such as Canada Employment Centres, Welfare Departments, relocation firms and colleges. Some of these services are free, while some charge a high fee. They are skills/behaviourally focused and do not address the emotional, social, and familial problems experienced by the unemployed.
2. Some communities have services which assist people with unemployment insurance applications and other concrete financially-focused help.
3. There are services which do comprehensive career counselling on both a group and an individual basis. Many of these organizations charge large fees. If they are free, they are targeted to specific need groups such as women re-entering the work force after a period of time away, or immigrant women. Most people who have lost their jobs do not have the money to pay for such services, nor do they qualify for free services. They may know what kind of jobs they want, but may lack more general coping skills such as staying motivated, managing their time, or dealing with the feelings associated with job loss.

The above services operate under the assumption that if someone learns proper job search skills, he/she will be able to find a job. The problems related to unemployment are therefore within the individual. This assumption is not appropriate in economically depressed areas across the country where there may not be enough jobs for those who are unemployed. In contrast with the above types of services, Handling Unemployment Groups attempts to provide support to recently unemployed people based on the following philosophy.

Diminishing Self-Blame

HUG challenges the assumptions which underlie most support services for the unemployed. Many services operate under the assumption that

the cause of unemployment is within the individual. Therefore in order to connect the person to a job, what needs to be addressed is his/her work skills, job search techniques, and motivation. Programs such as work incentives, relocation counselling, and job search courses are based on this assumption, which is reinforced by the wider social value of the "work ethic." The work ethic devalues unemployment and implies individual blame for the situation.

The focus on the individual was more appropriate in the 1950s to 1970s when we were dealing with frictional unemployment. This was caused by shifting needs in the labour market in an economy where there were generally enough jobs for the number of workers. However, now we are in a situation of systemic unemployment. There are not enough jobs for the number of people who are unemployed. Jobs are disappearing at a rapid rate due to technological change and relocation of industry. As well, there has been an infusion of people into the labour market as a result of the baby boom, and increasing numbers of youth and women entering the labour market. We are now dealing with unemployment as a constant economic fact.

We recognize that the individual must take responsibility and act in order to change his/her situation of unemployment. Also, unemployment takes a toll on self-esteem which must be addressed on an individual basis. However, it is crucial that unemployed people recognize the social context in which they are unemployed. As well, it is important that they understand that the personal reactions they go through are usually universal reactions to loss, and that others share these feelings. This takes the focus away from individual blame and helps people to mobilize their energy to create changes in their lives.

Information as a Tool of Empowerment

Most people are very mystified and confused by the human services and vocational counselling services in the community. Many of those suffering job loss have never had occasion to use such services and do not know where to begin. Therefore HUG puts a strong emphasis on helping people to understand and learn how to access community resources and systems such as Canada Employment Centre.

Mutual Support

There are a number of advantages to the group counselling approaches in working with unemployed people. Group counselling diminishes isolation and can be less threatening than one-to-one counselling. Hearing others express concerns can encourage people to enter taboo areas such as family conflict, suicidal thoughts, etc. Role-playing job

interviews of cold calls allows participants to take risks in a safe climate. In HUG groups the support which participants give to each other is just as important as the expertise of the facilitator. Some groups have continued to meet as leaderless self-help groups once the formal process has ended.

Flexibility

There is a necessity for the HUG model to be flexible. Each group has its own concerns, and therefore the facilitator may need to structure each group differently. There is no hard and fast agenda or curriculum which is followed each time, but rather topic "menus" which can be changed and modified. This flexibility sends the message to participants that they have input into the way the group will evolve. This philosophy is particularly important for unemployed people, since many of them are jobless because of decisions made by others.

Who Benefits Most From HUG Group?

The HUG group model was developed for unemployed people who have been in the work force and have lost their jobs for a variety of reasons. The key screening factor is that the participants are job ready, in that they are not in need of learning basic life skills or job maintenance skills. The length of unemployment of participants was ordinarily under one year, however, there were exceptions to this if the job-ready criterion was met. The need to screen people carefully was based on the fact that HUG was a very intensive short-term group experience. It did not have the mandate nor availability of time to cover basic life skills areas, or to do intensive career counselling. Inquiries from those who did not fit the criteria were referred to more appropriate services in the community.

Coping with Unemployment

"Coping" is not just doing the best you can under adversity, but involves active problem solving, access to support systems, understanding and acceptance of one's feelings, and knowing about personal and community resources. These are all areas which are emphasized in the group. The assumption is that people can cope with unemployment if they have the necessary tools.

In developing the HUG group content areas we tried to look at what elements were necessary to help people cope with unemployment. Our experience in working with unemployed people demonstrated that the following are crucial elements.

Communication and Assertiveness Skills

Time Management Skills

Decision-making/Goal Setting

Knowledge of options in the Labour Market

Understanding causes of Unemployment (Political/Social Issues)

Stress Management

Activities which build Self-Esteem, develop Self-Awareness, and create access to Personal Support

Knowledge of Job Search Techniques

Knowledge of Community Resources

If these are addressed, people can avoid falling into the emotional "yo-yo" state and the job search burnout which often comes with long-term unemployment. From these areas a "menu" of topics was developed. Which topics were covered and in what order of priority was decided by the group. Lectures were balanced with experimental exercises. As well, emotionally "heavy" topics such as job loss stages, or stress, were balanced with more positively motivating concrete topics such as community resources and job search techniques.

Job Loss Stages

Each person goes through varying experiences with job loss. There are many factors which affect people's reactions to unemployment. These include availability of support systems, age, family, and financial situations. They also include geographic location, skills and educational level, as well as conditions surrounding the original job loss. In terms of economic class, white collar workers are more likely to place blame for unemployment on themselves, but also seem more likely to bounce back due to financial reserves, education, networks and willingness to relocate. Blue collar workers feel more out of control due to more limited financial resources and involvement in decision-making.

Certain personal attitudes also have an impact on a person's experience of job loss. These involve the importance of work in a person's life, and also their ability to cope with loss and crisis in general. Whether the person sees themselves as a victim of life's events or has a feeling of having an impact on the world is also important.

Finally, the longer the unemployment, the more likely it is that the person will be depressed and discouraged.

Although people's responses will vary greatly based on all of the above factors, there does seem to be a set of responses common to most people, analogous to the grief cycle described by E. Kubler-Ross in *On Death and Dying* (1969). This is where the counsellor can be very helpful if he/she understands where the employee is in the emotional cycle. In groups we open the door to discussion of these issues by asking the group to discuss the questions: "What do you lose when you lose a job?" and "How do

you feel when you lose a job?" A person's initial response is often one of shock and denial — refusing to believe this dreaded life crisis has really happened. For example, in one group a participant who had been on a contract which ended one week prior to the first HUG session was still in a state of shock. She admitted that it did not really "sink in," that she was unemployed, until the fourth session of the group. She resisted discussion of feelings and reactions to being unemployed because she could not identify with the emotional ups and downs of the other group members, and was afraid that if she really heard their feelings that she would have to acknowledge her own.

In the following stages people often feel angry and depressed as they realize the reality of being unemployed. A period of acceptance and job search usually follows the initial reactions. However, there is still frequently an emotional "yo-yo" back to more negative early reactions depending on the response from the environment (Borgen & Amundson, 1984). As one woman put it, "I go through the yo-yo at least three times a day." If the period of unemployment is long-term and if people do not have external and internal resources, they may fall back into depression and eventually reach a stage of burnout. In this stage they may give up searching, or take a low-paying part-time job just to scrape by.

Intervening with people early in the process is important in order to avoid job search burnout. In the discussion of job loss stages we encourage participants to look at themselves as "more than an unemployed person," and to focus on their strengths.

EVALUATION RESULTS

Evaluation questionnaires were filled in during the second session and the last session, and were also administered by telephone four months after the group meetings ended. The questionnaires included a stress symptom checklist, a questionnaire on job search activities and perception of factors affecting employment, as well as a group evaluation questionnaire. A full description of the evaluation outcome can be read in the HUG Evaluation Report. The results were quite encouraging.

Participants were very satisfied with the program and rated the psychological group/support as the most highly-valued component. Forty-three percent of participants continued to meet regularly in self-help groups after the nine sessions ended. People also reported receiving more support from friends and family after going through the group program. As a result of the sessions, there was a decline in the number of participants who attributed negative job results to luck and internal factors. There was also a decline in stress-related health symptoms.

One change in the program was a shift from the original goal of using volunteer or lay leadership. A need was recognized for leaders with previous group leadership and counselling experience. This was due to

the high level of many participants. Leaders were required to learn much specific HUG content. They therefore did not have time to focus on learning about group dynamics.

It was generally concluded that the program model was successful in meeting its goals. Training in the model was done across Canada, and it has been adapted and used in several provinces.

A *Leader's Manual* is available for those who may wish to adapt the model to their own settings. It includes handouts and background reading as well as descriptions of how to conduct each session.

Further information on the development of the program as well as the Evaluation are available in the *Handling Unemployment Group Final Report* and *Handling Unemployment Group Evaluation Report*.

References

- Borgen, W. & Amundson, N. (1984). *The Experience of Unemployment*. Scarborough, Ontario: Nelson Canada.
- Kubler-Ross, E. (1969). *On death and dying*. New York: MacMillan.

Note: The "Handling Unemployment Groups" program was a two-year project sponsored by the Canadian Mental Health Association, Metro Toronto Branch. All publications are available from the Canadian Mental Health Association, 3101 Bathurst Street, Fifth Floor, Toronto, Ontario, M6A 2A6.

About the Author

Ellen Passmore has been working in the human services field for the past 16 years, with a focus on human rights, employment equity, and individual and group counselling. She has developed a number of group training programs including counselling for women re-entering the work force, group leadership skills and the "Handling Unemployment Groups." She is currently an Employment Equity Consultant with the Ontario Women's Directorate.

Address correspondence to: Ellen Passmore, 232 Heath Street West, Toronto, Ontario, M5P 1N8.