Workplace Survivor Syndrome

Chances are you’ve felt the impact of a layoff, whether it’s the loss of your own job, witnessing layoffs at your company, or just knowing friends and colleagues who are on the unemployment line.

“But Aren’t You Glad It Wasn’t You?”

Compounding the problem is a scarcity of support for downsizing survivors. After all, shouldn’t layoff survivors just be grateful to be working? A 2008 study by Leadership IQ reported that “guilt” was one of the top three words used by layoff survivors to describe their feelings. The other two were “anger” and “anxiety.”

It’s tough, there’s no question about it. Here are some strategies to help you cope:

1. Allow yourself time to grieve. The emotional stress of saying good-bye to longtime coworkers is very similar to losing a loved one.
2. Resist the temptation to “avenge” lost coworkers. What’s done is done. Holding a grudge helps no one, least of all you.
3. If you haven’t received this information already, ask for clarification on how job cuts were decided. Understanding the reasoning behind each decision can help alleviate the guilt of being spared.
4. Avoid office gossip about further cuts and who may go next. It only adds to stress and anxiety. Focus instead on being positive and productive.
5. Find opportunity within adversity. Taking on additional work can be a stressor, but it can also open previously closed avenues. Use company shake-ups to press for assignments that lead to professional growth and personal fulfillment.
6. Take a mental break. Reconnect with friends and family. Take a short trip. Putting physical distance between yourself and work, even for a day, is a great way to distance yourself emotionally and gain perspective.
7. Use your company’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP). The EAP has experts and resources that can help you get through a rough time, all free and confidential to you. Be sure to ask about programs and materials geared specifically toward coping with layoffs.
8. Cut yourself some slack. Do your best each day, but don’t burden yourself with the expectation that it’s up to you to single-handedly save the company. Remember that the current upheaval is temporary and that brighter days are ahead.

The Fallout

What you’re feeling is called “workplace survivor syndrome,” a term coined by organizational psychologists to describe the emotional, psychological, and physical effects of employees who remain in the midst of company downsizing.

Is it real? Multiple studies suggest that job cuts are just as hard on the people left behind as they are on those who’ve been downsized. A 2003 study published by the Institute of Behavioral Science showed an increase in alcohol consumption, smoking, and workplace injury among layoff survivors. It also showed that it takes six years for layoff survivors to recover from the experience. Other studies report depression, low productivity, and poor morale among surviving staff.

It’s one thing to read about layoffs in your local paper; it’s quite another to see a close colleague pack his kid’s pictures into a heavy box and hobble for the door, to find yourself speechless in the face of his shock and humiliation, to know that you may never share a joke over lunch again.

You’ve been spared – for now, at least. But being lucky never felt so bad. Miserable is how most downsizing survivors would describe it – grinding through heavy daily workloads while waiting anxiously for the other shoe to drop and wondering why it was the other guy, and not yourself, who ended up out of work.

This information is not intended to replace the medical advice of your doctor or healthcare provider. Please consult your health care provider or EAP for advice about a personal concern or medical condition.