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By Laura Fowlie

Feb. 1 1999 -- You're fired - get over it

Coping with the trauma of losing your job involves talking it out, working it out, learning from it, and going on to recognize the skills you have to offer

Getting fired is not the unusual or shameful event it used to be, but not all employees can recover quickly from the shock of being bounced from their job. In some cases, fired workers can become paralyzed by their emotions after their dismissal, left at a standstill when they should be thinking about taking their next step.

Older workers who have spent several years in the same industry or with the same employer are most vulnerable to feelings of anger, hurt and embarrassment after they are fired, counsellors and employment experts say. "Younger people seem to take it a lot better and bounce back more quickly, probably because they are used to seeing career instability and uncertainty around them" says Frank Bruni, president of Toronto-based recruitment firm Career Lab Inc. (formerly, Independent Management Group Inc.) "But there's always a certain

amount of introspection that comes with leaving a job involuntarily. You wonder if you could have done things any different."

For those having trouble coping with the trauma of being fired, talking to friends and career professionals about what happened - and trying to learn from it - are the best courses of action says Dr. Christine Hansen, a Markham Ont.- based psychologist specializing in career management. In addition to helping restore damaged self-confidence, professional career support can help stop people from making mistakes as they search the employment market, and open their minds to opportunities they may not have considered before.

Dr. Hansen describes the experience of one executive downsized at the age of 52. After a thorough career assessment, she says he identified and began to work on several limitations that had never been pointed out to him in his previous job. "Once people have the chance to really do a lot of reflecting, they can become much more aware of what would be a good career fit for them," Dr. Hansen says. "They start thinking about their skills and limitations in new ways."

Working with a career counsellor, personal coach or outplacement firm can also help candidates overcome the crisis in confidence that affects many fired workers.

Rob Hood, vice president with Drake

Beam Morin in Toronto, says his firm assists hundreds of displaced workers each year, and he reminds them that they are in good company. "Even five years ago, if your employment had been terminated you must have done something wrong. Now people are being displaced and at a very rapid pace through no fault their own," Mr. Hood says. "But that doesn't mean people don't feel some pain in the process." He coaches his clients to take some time to recover before diving back into and job market - anywhere from a few weeks to a few months, "depending on how badly damaged" the feel. Outplacement firms can help people begin to start networking again, and can also help spouses understand what to expect when their partners are fired. The can also help people identify their strengths and package the information on updated résumé - a confidence - building process they may not have gone through in years.

" They need time to talk to people about what happened how they are feeling and where they want to go," Mr. Hood says. One of the biggest stumbling blocks for dismissed employees as they begin their new job search is how to answer the question of why they were terminated, and whether it reflects negatively on their employability. Having regained your confidence in handling this situation is vital say employment experts. Prospective employers aren't interested in employees who are still obviously struggling with emotional wounds.

One manager recalls interviewing two candidates for a sales position, both of whom were highly qualified but had been dismissed from their previous positions. When asked why her employment had been terminated, the first explain in detail that a family crisis had distracted her from her job for a few months, and that it had affected her relationship with her employer - but she had no idea that the situation had deteriorated so badly until she was dismissed. The second candidate simply stated that he was part of a department - wide downsizing, adding that his performance had actually improved in the two years before his dismissal.

" The first candidate was probably being far more honest and the second, but in the end I had a better feeling about the second candidate" the manager says. " I know it's a very tough question to get the right answer for, but I got the feeling the first person just had a lot of issues to resolve about her firing."

This example illustrates what employment experts say is a critical balance between honesty and brevity: employers want to here an explanation, but make sure you stick to the short version.

"You have to tell the truth, but the key is to defuse the situation as early on and as quickly in the interview as possible" Mr. Bruni says. "I've interviewed candidates who tried to dance around the issue, but the longer it takes to get it into the

open, the more the employer thinks you may have something to hide." Mr. Bruni suggests volunteering the fact that you were dismissed if it doesn't come up in the first 10 to 15 minutes of the interview. The issue should be dealt with and the emphasis quickly shifted to your accomplishments and strengths in your previous job.

Mr. Hood says most interviewers will accept brief explanations such as "the position was eliminated" or "the company downsized my department" but points out that more seasoned interviewers will want to know how the company selected who stayed and who was shown the door. " We do a little bit of coaching on how to handle that situation, and it usually involves coming back to the candidate's skill level and accomplishments," he says. " In one off situations where it was not part of a major downsizing, we may have to facilitate an agreement between the former employer and the candidate about what the explanation should be, and both stick to the script."

That explanation should be simple, such as "my employer and I saw the product heading in two completely different directions. In the end, we had to agree to disagree."

Getting fired often means the freedom to think about your career

in new ways, or at least the opportunity start a new and better job.

"Employment changes are often like sports trades," Mr. Bruni says. "Trade an athlete that was doing OK on one team to a new team, and he can become a star."

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