

Coping with Stress, Part 2

So many of you have responded to last week's newsletter that I felt compelled to expand upon it further. One of the louder messages that surfaced from your comments was the sense of isolation that many of you feel during your period of "transition". Each of us deals with stress in a different way and I mentioned some of the various stress induced behavior patterns in my last newsletter. One of them was personal isolation, which is a very common reaction among us. When you lose your position, you become isolated from your former co-workers and colleagues. Unemployed executives report that some former co-workers avoid them. Rejection by your company and co-workers, even when labeled a layoff, is a serious blow to your professional pride and takes away your sense of self-esteem and self-worth. Some of your messages led me to believe that you are feeling less than adequate in the presence of your families and friends and are withdrawing from them. You feel that they don't and can't understand your suffering. This makes your experience more painful and leads to despair.

I feel like I'm taking some risk here because I have a male point of view. I do not wish to offend our female TENG members and hope that I can make this article as gender non-specific as possible. On the other hand, I don't want our male members to feel that I am not giving them their due. Men and women alike define themselves more by their careers than anything else. Those who are unemployed tend to say so in an embarrassed, apologetic manner. When you endure unemployment for an extended period, your confidence is shaken and you begin to feel like damaged goods. Some of you are in disbelief. People with impressive careers and educational credentials are almost shell shocked by the steady stream rejections and lack of acknowledgement they receive in the employment marketplace. With no end in sight, they don't know their next step.

Many of you have shared that you were always too busy to network, but now recognize its importance. Most senior IT executives are under considerable pressure and are too busy, when employed to reach out to their peers. When they lose their positions, they have to deal with the sudden change and the forces of inertia, because they have been forging ahead at a frenetic pace and they suddenly have little if anything urgent to do. We are all human and our similarities vastly outweigh our differences. Networking for you may become a lifeline and many of you have remarked that this has been a major learning experience. You will never let your network die.

Speaking again from my experience as a recruiter, I find that whenever I have performed searches for technology sales and marketing people, networking to find candidates is easier. I think this is because the people who gravitate to those professions are by their nature more outgoing and have built the networking habit to get their jobs done. Matt Bud, Chairman of the Financial Executives Network Group, our sister organization, commented once that most senior financial executives need to network because they are the keepers of the corporate secrets and business security allows them to share little

information with others. The VP Sales can brag about the big account they just landed. If the CFO starts to speak about the company's stock price, s/he may be fired or accused of collaborating in an insider-trading ring. By their nature, many CFO's, IT chiefs, R&D and engineering executives are quieter than their sales and marketing counterparts. They deal with proprietary information based on numbers, technology, products, theories and experiments. They look inside themselves and into the trusted research or advice of a select few for answers. They can be at a loss for where to begin when they lose their jobs. They may be looking inside themselves, but their answers lay with others.

Being the father of a teenage daughter is one of the greater tests, if not the greatest challenge of my life. The author of one book on adolescent parenting commented that both teenage girls and boys pull away from their parents and rebel, but that boys tend to be quieter and more withdrawn. Girls on the other hand, will talk more with friends and occasionally with their parents. I have read articles, which have made similar comparisons with adults. My understanding is that men internalize problems to appear strong while women will share intimate feelings with their peers. I have also noticed that most of the negative feelings that our members share come from the male side, whereas our female members seem to be more focused on dealing with career transition as an adventure. This speaks volumes about women in terms of intellectual and emotional strength, because as enlightened as we think we may be and in spite of all of the equal opportunity and affirmative action talk, women have a more difficult time making it into the executive suite than men do. I may have to shut down my Email for the next month for saying that one, but I believe it's true, though I lack scientific evidence.

In both cases when men and women lose their jobs, their egos take a major hit. Since pre-historic times, the man has always been the hunter and the provider. Take away his means of bringing home the bacon, and his feelings of adequacy and his masculinity are bruised. For many professional women, their career represents the pinnacle for achieving financial, intellectual and professional equality and independence. Many women are the primary breadwinners or are single heads of households. Maybe they don't have the male genetic link to ancestors who hunted wild boars, but their predicament nowadays is every bit as serious as that of their male counterparts.

Part of our feelings of isolation and stress are linked to our routines. When we're working, others need us and we're fulfilled. We have commitments and deadlines. Now in unemployment, we have time on our hands and that creates stress at home, simply because we may be in the way of those we love and need the most, or we are staring at the four walls. Earlier generations usually didn't face this sense of loss until retirement. My former business partner from an early venture, was many years my senior. He shared with me a story of one of his contemporaries, who shortly after beginning his retirement, was escorted to the front door by his wife and told to go find something to do. She said, "I married you for better or for worse, but not for lunch". Whenever I work from home, I have noticed that I interrupt my family's routines. My wife and daughter both try to be quieter and are afraid to disturb me. It's harder for them to do what they want to do in their own way. Their equilibrium is upset. When we're alone, we simply make lunch, a cup of coffee or tea for ourselves. When another member of the household is home, we

feel compelled to offer to make some for them. A simple task has just doubled in complexity. If we are trying to make networking phone calls, compose cover letters or edit our resume and the television is too loud or the dog is barking or some other noise interrupts us, this magnifies our stress and frustration. It easily leads to arguments, bickering and further isolation, making the problem ever greater. On the other hand, those who live alone and who have become accustomed to the office dynamics, may find that the silence of suddenly being alone all day every day can be suffocating.

This common thread of isolation driven by sense of loss and inadequacy seems to be shared by many TENG members. How do you deal with this when money may be tight and nerves are frayed at home?

- If you have just joined TENG this week go to last week's newsletter, Vol. 2 No 15 and read the recommendations. You can find this and all previous newsletters at www.brunerconsulting.com Click on the TENG button.
- Find other networking groups and support groups. Multiple memberships are all right. Check your local newspapers or search on line. You may find a local support group for those in transition. One of my colleagues in the search industry has chaired such a group for many years. You need to look outward, not inward. Talk to people. This is not easy, but it is essential
- Don't be the "doom and gloom" person around your friends and loved ones. They know you are in pain. You don't have to remind them all the time or use your stress as an excuse for not being considerate and supportive of them. My wife of nearly twenty-four years understands the challenges of my career and still knows how to make me laugh, when I most need it. Yet if I become overly negative, she feels my stress and is affected by it.
- Manage your career search, as I have suggested in previous newsletters, but manage your time as well. If you are married or in a significant other relationship, make the time to support your loved one(s). If your significant other has a job, then take over some of their duties at home. Don't wait for your partner to ask you, just do it. They may be feeling pressure by being the sole breadwinner. If they don't work outside the home, then give them a chance to get away. Running their errands, cooking dinner, doing the laundry and cleaning the house are all fair game. Supervising your kids' homework can be stressful but can free up your partner for more relaxing pursuits if they do it on a routine basis.
- I agree with the concept that when in transition your full time job is looking for a job, but I also think that this needs to be placed in some perspective. Spending forty hours per week making cold calls, sending out Emails and letters, dealing with stressed out recruiters and Human Resource "gatekeepers" can give the most optimistic among us a negative outlook. Unless you have spent your career in cold call sales, the constant rejection in a down market can be overwhelming. Build your schedule to allow breaks for recreation and volunteer/charitable works. It may improve your sense of humor and your outlook.
- Find a therapeutic activity that is inexpensive. Last week I mentioned walking, reading and gardening. If you're a golfer and can't afford the country club dues, try a public course. Many libraries and bookstores invite authors to address small

- audiences free of charge or for very modest cost. Most public school systems offer low-cost adult classes in a variety of subjects ranging from music, foreign languages, painting, personal fitness, cooking, investing, etc. Perhaps you and your spouse or significant other can take different classes on alternate evenings.
- Isolation and lack of communications destroys relationships and lives. You are suffering right now, but family, friends and total strangers may need you. Try to tune in to what is going on in their lives and be supportive. Looking outward will distract you from self-absorption.
 - Nearly all of us will go on with our lives and find happiness. We will eventually find jobs and have comfortable lives. Our experiences will help to shape and define us. We will be glad when this is over, and we will never want to go through anything like it again, but we may have to. For many of us, this is not our first experience with downsizing or unemployment nor will it be our last. But with each one, we can become stronger.

Great Britain's wartime Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, faced almost insurmountable odds against the Nazi onslaught. He led his country in defiance to ultimate victory against a seemingly invincible enemy. Near the end of his life, he was invited to address the graduating class of Oxford University. He reportedly stepped up to the podium and uttered three words, "Never give up", and then sat down. The audience was stunned. A moment later, he walked back to the podium and repeated, "Never give up", and sat down for the final time. This is good advice in any age.

© Copyright, 2002, Edward J. Pospesil, Jr.

Ed Pospesil
Chairman
Technology Executives Network Group

Vice President
Bruner Consulting Associates, Inc.
33 Elizabeth Street, 3rd Floor
Derby, CT 06418
epospesil@brunerconsulting.com
www.brunerconsulting.com
Phone: 203-732-7084 / 866-566-2224
Fax: 203-732-9033

This e-mail and any attachment contain information, which is private and confidential and is intended for the addressee only. If you are not an addressee, you are not authorized to read, copy or use the e-mail or any attachment. If you have received this e-mail in error, please notify the sender by return e-mail and then destroy it. Thank you.