

# Workplace Survivor Syndrome



*“With 1.93 million people losing their jobs between August and December 2008, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 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.”*

(Washington Business Journal, Jan. 23, 2009)

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 massive daily workloads while waiting anxiously for the other shoe to drop and wondering why it was the other guy, and not themselves, who ended up out of work.

## 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 long years for layoff survivors to recover from their trauma. Other studies report depression, plummeting productivity and poor morale among surviving staff.

## “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 trauma of saying goodbye to long time 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** Ask for clarification on how job cuts were chosen. 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 shakeups 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). Most offer a wide range of free or discounted services that can help you get through a rough time. 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 downturn is temporary and that brighter days are ahead.