Chapter 12
Job Loss and Shared Trauma During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Helping Clients and the Impact on the Clinician

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Introduction

As a social work clinician and trained psychotherapist, I work with adults on issues surrounding anxiety, trauma, and the daily grind of living in New York City. As a coach serving outplacement firms and private clients, I work with individuals who have lost their jobs and assist them with decision-making and tools for their job search. At times, it is tricky to have both professional hats, especially when a client arrives looking for job placement assistance, and our conversation reveals the existence of personal issues that, if addressed, could assist the client in both their professional and personal life. If the client is not interested in exploring those deeper issues, it can be frustrating for me to witness.

The loss of one’s job under “normal circumstances” is often fraught with fear, anxiety, and trauma. Add the current pandemic and it is a recipe for an exacerbation of those symptoms, as well as shared trauma for the clinician (Tosone 2012). As human beings we associate our identity, our worth, and our status with our jobs. The loss of a professional role can leave an individual feeling lost, powerless, and worthless, and during the pandemic, these feelings are coinciding with other experiences of confusion and helplessness related to the virus and its repercussions.

The pandemic also aggravates the impact of job loss in the sense that, amid the widespread unemployment and recession related to COVID-19, it is taking longer on average for people to find jobs. With drawn-out periods of unemployment, I see more depression and more anxiety in my clients, along with more revelation of childhood trauma related to feelings of inadequacy. Individuals who may have been able to bury feelings of worthlessness because they were “always successful on their job” find themselves confronting such feelings once they face continued
unemployment; they begin to tell themselves, “I’ll never get a job; I’m a failure; how can I even support my family?” These feelings are deeply rooted and often cannot be easily dealt with in a coaching scenario. The client, however, is not always open to psychotherapy and may even resist “going there” at all. This makes it extremely difficult to address, much less resolve, the trauma.

This chapter outlines the difficulties I have encountered in working with clients during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time of high unemployment and generalized anxiety. It explains my approach to assisting clients in reclaiming a sense of power and capability, from the first step—recognizing their stress symptoms—to the final step of securing a new job. It encompasses ways to build their mental strength and confidence even when their preferences and their state of distress limit the possibilities for direct therapeutic work.

Unemployment, Trauma, and COVID-19

As a trained psychotherapist and a coach for job-seeking professionals, I have clients coming to me for very different reasons. Some clients who come to me for job placement services are happy to explore the deeper psychological issues that figure in their professional lives. However, not all clients are willing to delve into the roots of their situation. When the client’s focus is strongly centered on getting a job, and not being analyzed, it is hard as a clinician to witness and understand how avoidance of underlying issues may be increasing the client’s trauma and mental anguish.

This resistance to analysis on the part of many clients speaks to the difference between psychotherapy and coaching. In psychotherapy, the clinician looks to both the individual’s past and current state to uncover the issues that are causing stress in their life. In coaching, the client identifies the problem they want solved, and as the coach you look to the current state the client is in to see what must be changed. As a trained psychotherapist who has specialized in job coaching with the option of a therapeutic component for over 20 years, I have had the opportunity to see up close and personal the angst losing one’s job can cause. I can usually tell within the first 20 min of meeting the client whether they will be willing to work on personal issues or whether they are solely interested in getting another job. Under normal circumstances I would simply assist the latter type of client in getting a new job, a task that would usually take 3–4 months. Now, however, I am seeing it takes 6–9 months, and for many people, this is too long to hold it together under the pressures unemployment creates. A form of decompensation begins to take hold, which presents a professional dilemma for me because I am ethically bound to try to help them maintain their mental health. This can create a very uncomfortable and difficult situation for both of us. With jobs hard to come by, there is only so much I can do to help them succeed in their search. Often all I can do is to offer comfort and support. I find myself turning into a “cheerleader,” not a role I am comfortable with nor enjoy, as I try to keep their spirits up and keep them motivated. If they are clients who do not want the comfort and support, they are likely to take their frustration out on me.
In a sense, during the COVID crisis, my job-seeking clients and I are united in our frustration at an intractable situation. This, coupled with the fact that we are individually and collectively facing the perils of the COVID-19 pandemic for ourselves and our loved ones, makes the situation fraught with anxiety, helplessness, and loss of control. One of the most common complaints I hear from clients seeking new opportunities is “I hate this, I feel so out of control, so at the mercy of others. I cannot ‘make’ anything happen but must rely on others to get things done. At my job I got stuff done, now I have to wait for others to do it.” And, sadly, there is truth to this statement. If one is successful in their job, they are often seen by others as being accomplished, “getting things done.” On the other hand, when one is asked to leave a job, even a job one did not necessarily like, through no fault of one’s own, one can feel violated and out of control. This was not their decision; they had no input. The loss can be equated to the loss of any type of relationship: one never likes to be dumped. Along with a painful sense of rejection, there is a feeling of helplessness that can recall the powerlessness of childhood.

With the unemployment rate in the United States as of June 2020 standing at 11.1%, an increase of more than 200% from 3.5% unemployment when the pandemic began, there are now 17.8 million Americans out of work (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020). This huge increase causes a multitude of problems, including increased domestic violence (Schneider et al. 2016), increased crime (Raphael and Winter-Ebmer, 2001), and the personal psychological problems experienced by the out-of-work individual and their loved ones (Finnegan 2015). With unemployment numbers at June 2020 levels, stress is also magnified for the clinician/coach. My colleagues and I have more and more clients facing extended unemployment, and we feel like we can do less and less for them. Having worked in many industries, in many locations, with many organizations, my subjective sense is that the current moment is more overwhelming and desperate than anything I have encountered before. It is harder to find that “silver lining,” that nugget of hope or wisdom, that will make it better.

As the clients become more fraught with angst, it spills over to the clinician. Though I consider myself a positive person, it is draining and exhausting to hear consistent negativity from so many clients, no matter how understandable that negativity may be. A lack of positive feedback chips away at the clinician’s optimism. This demoralization combines with the stresses that everyone is feeling during the pandemic, particularly that of isolation. As a gregarious person, I find it difficult to spend my life on Zoom. I do not find the same human energy in a virtual setting, and it is much harder or near impossible, when seeing only a client’s face, to pick up on the many nonverbal cues that supplement a person’s verbal communication for a full picture of their state of mind.

Under such circumstances, both client and clinician may lose confidence in their own efficacy. My experience is that the most effective approach is to address the client’s immediate dilemma—i.e., their unemployment and resulting frustration—with a keen awareness of their disorientation, helplessness, and hopelessness. Clients have a daunting task before them; by breaking it down into manageable
steps, each building on the last, we are able to address both emotional and practical needs.

What Can Be Done?

My first goal when a client struggles with helplessness is to assist them in understanding what they are experiencing. This is a prerequisite to helping them regain some of their control. When an individual goes into shock (and sudden unemployment is certainly a form of shock), they may not know what is happening to them and lack the distance or perspective to put their experience in context. As a first step, I try to help them understand what they are experiencing and how it may affect them by explaining the symptoms and challenges that stress can cause, such as forgetfulness, aches, pains, sleeplessness, weight fluctuation, digestive problems, anxiety, poor judgment, chest pains, nausea, dizziness, and loss of sexual drive (https://www.apa.org/topics/stress-body), which are all potential.

Allowing the individual to understand what they are experiencing and that this is “normal” for the circumstances can be very helpful, because it can provide reassurance and a chance to learn ways of reducing stress and taking back control. In many cases, clients will notice stress symptoms without understanding that those symptoms are stress-related. For example, they may comment, “I keep forgetting things; maybe I’m losing my mind.” I like to explain how humans are hard-wired for survival, and that times of stress can be likened to being under attack. As our bodies go on the defense, less primal functions, like memory and reason, are the first functions to be sacrificed, and we begin to act impulsively. Clients under extreme stress, therefore, are often not thinking clearly or rationally. Understanding that their symptoms are predictable in their situation and attributable to stress tends to come as a relief for clients.

Figure 12.1, which I developed for my own stress management workshops, outlines symptoms of stress, showing its impact on the body and mind.

Strategies for Improvement

Once the individual understands what they are experiencing and has begun managing their stress, they can move on to the next step, taking some control. This is a crucial step, as their loss of control is at the very heart of the issue. I find the best way to foster a sense of control is to assist clients in creating schedules, routines, and processes: simple measures that focus their attention on what they can control in their life, even if they cannot make a new job happen at will. By making a daily agenda listing all the activities they want to accomplish for the day, by what time, they help themselves accomplish concrete, measurable goals and set up a system to
acknowledge those achievements. Agendas/schedules should project plans for at least 2 weeks into the future; this time span gives the client a sense of anticipation and advance goals, but does not look so far into the future that goals seem out of reach. Planning 2 weeks ahead also gives them an opportunity to create a structure encompassing the steps they need to take, and to work within a process.

Another practice I encourage among clients is that of looking back on past accomplishments and considering how they can share these with hiring organizations. The process of reviewing their successes builds self-esteem and resilience, and deciding how to present these successes lets them take control through the process of shaping this part of their professional narrative.

Building on Successes

Once a client understands where they are and has regimented what they are doing, they then can move on to the third step, which is to build on their successes. I encourage clients to push themselves to achieve more each day. At this point in their strategy, they should be less stressed and therefore able to step back from their situation enough to systematically take stock of their past accomplishments, successes, enjoyments, and wishes. I ask them to look for similarities between past circumstances and those of the present moment in order to share with prospective employers any key examples of past successes that may be relevant now.

For example, I may ask a client to describe two things they did well in their most recent job. If they tell me they designed and implemented a new program, I ask them to break those successes down into the steps that were required. Once they have identified the steps, I ask the following: What are the steps you would need to take

**Fig. 12.1** Signs and symptoms of stress
now to show that you can be successful in looking for a job? Often clients will worry aloud that they have no control over whether they will be hired. I point out to them that they could not guarantee their success in any project undertaken at a previous job, but they convinced bosses or colleagues to believe in or to accept their work. Similarly, I point out, they can convince potential employers to believe in and hire them.

Documentation

The fourth step is for clients to document their successes. Doing so gives them a way to see what they have achieved, and to identify patterns in where they have been successful, increasing their chances of being successful again. Literally creating a document or table to record past successes also makes it easier to identify them appropriately in an interview. This step often requires significant effort from the clinician/coach, because you may need to tease out for the client what they have achieved, and where they have been successful. When a client is depressed, it is very difficult for them to see success or achievement, and working with them to identify their selling points can sometimes be painstaking. It cannot be glossed over.

Sharing Success

Once the client is able to collect and document what they have achieved, they will often experience a feeling of pride and self-esteem. It is extremely important to capture this and bring it to the client’s attention. They will need to hold on to these thoughts and feelings when they begin to present their qualifications to prospective organizations. This process of sharing successes is the fifth step of the process I undertake with clients. Networking is a vital skill in the job-seeking process. Since sharing successes is an important part of networking, it must be practiced.

I share with clients that they need to create a compelling story about their past successes. These successes need to be shared in the same way someone would tell their friends what they did on Saturday night; the story needs a beginning, a middle, and an end. I ask clients to tell me the story of what they have done in the past, and if they tell it in a boring way, I stop them. Together we polish the story, until it is both a good story and one that they are comfortable with. It is crucial that the client is comfortable with the story and confident telling it; if they are not, they certainly will not be able to sell it to somebody else.
**Closing the Deal**

The sixth and final step of my strategy with clients comes when they receive a job offer. “Closing the deal” involves assisting a client in negotiating, as they consider the pros and cons of what they are accepting and why. This phase should also include staying cognizant of the issues they have struggled with in the hope that they will avoid repeating them and will be happy in the position they accept. For example, many clients may struggle with “imposter syndrome”: the belief that they don’t deserve any position they may attain. It’s important for me to have such clients step back to consider and discuss why they do deserve their professional attainments. Until they can accept their successes, they will constantly look for others’ approval and external validation, never finding a sense of security and fulfillment at work. If we cannot get clients to address such issues, we as clinicians will be frustrated by the knowledge that their damaging cycles are bound to be repeated. We will carry with us the unsettling sense that nothing has been learned.

**Conclusion**

As clinicians, we are interested in helping clients, and there is no better feeling or outcome than to improve clients’ habits and outcomes. Conversely, there is no greater frustration than to see your client unable to discern their way out of a suboptimal situation. However, maintaining our perspective and distance as clinicians is imperative in helping clients. When we cannot assist our clients and succumb to helpless feelings, we then share their trauma and loss. The COVID-19 pandemic has proved especially challenging as both client and clinician have their own concerns about the impact of the virus on their lives, in addition to job-related concerns. Managing our own emotions and helping our clients to manage theirs can become a parallel process, far preferable to the one in which we are suffering along with them, and thus incapable of providing meaningful assistance. Over the years I have worked for four of the major international consulting firms and I have seen a lot of trauma, but today’s clients seem to face a particularly difficult situation, with fewer options and a faster, more demanding pace in most professional roles. Workers are expected to be available 24/7 because our technology allows that to happen. Working from home, though convenient for—even preferred by—many, can further erode the boundary between professional and private life. This makes for greater levels of stress during periods of employment, and this raises the potential for disorientation when unemployment strikes and the structure provided by work has disappeared.

As clinicians and/or coaches, we will need to be there to support our clients amid changes that challenge them and us. Our ability to be open to such new challenges will be critical to our client’s success, and our own.
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