

Set your CNN.com Edition CNN International CNN U.S.

SET EDITION

March 30, 2009 -- Updated 1408 GMT (2208 HKT)

MIXX SHARE EMAIL SAVE PRINT

Dealing with layoff survivor's guilt

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- People who see colleagues get pink slips can have their own struggles
- Just because you're sad and scared doesn't mean you can stop working
- "Remaining employees are often expected to 'do more with less,'" expert says
- Expert: If someone you know is laid off, keep communication open and friendly

[Next Article in Living »](#)

READ

VIDEO

By Anthony Balderrama
CareerBuilder writer

TEXT SIZE



Editor's note: CNN.com has a business partnership with CareerBuilder.com, which serves as the exclusive provider of job listings and services to CNN.com.



After a layoff occurs, everyone in the company is left balancing their emotions with their duties.

With unemployment numbers continuing their steady climb, you've probably seen layoffs happen in your company or to someone you know -- hopefully not to you.

As you can probably attest, losing a job is never easy on anyone, even if it turns out to be for the best.

What you might not think about is how people who are spared from cuts deal with the aftermath. As weird as it sounds, people who see their colleagues receive pink slips can have their own struggles as a result.

You probably wonder why anyone would feel anything but happy about having a job in a shaky economy -- isn't that like complaining that your wallet is too small for all your hundreds? -- but

survivor guilt is common. [Watch layoff etiquette »](#)

Uh ... I'm sorry?

After a layoff occurs, everyone in the company is left balancing their emotions with their duties. Just because you're sad, scared and relieved doesn't mean you're given a pass to stop working, even though you'd rather take some personal time to assess the situation.

Paul C.* encountered the struggle, but he didn't have much time to deal with it. Paul and his co-worker were in a meeting when an administrative aid asked them to report to their boss's supervisor ASAP. As they left, Paul told the meeting attendees that he was sorry they had to leave but that they'd resume the meeting later, "Unless, of course, we're being fired."

Don't Miss

- [Why you might want to work weekends](#)
- [Is your job doomed? How to survive](#)
- [Listening to music at work -- dos and don'ts](#)
- [More CareerBuilder stories](#)

As luck would have it, that was the situation -- except Paul was the only one from his group spared because his job also dealt in sales. While he went back to his office, the rest were escorted out of the building.

"It was weird and difficult trying to carry on while the people who made my sales position possible were no longer there -- or at least I did have survivor thoughts, until one month later they fired me, too!"

Although Paul's situation was at times humorous, it highlights the reality that you can't focus all of your energy on feeling guilty because you

have your own career to worry about, too.

How to maintain relationships

Most Popular on CNN

STORIES

	Most Viewed	Most Emailed
1	Brother beheads little sister	
2	Plea includes resurrection clause	
3	French workers hold bosses hostage	
4	Singapore sees power changes ahead	
5	Medvedev: I'll embrace Obama	
6	Will April Fools' virus hit you?	
7	New Israeli PM warns of extremism	
8	Madonna awaits adoption decision	
9	Dalai Lama thanks India for 50 years...	
10	Polish navy flight crashes	

[more most popular »](#)

VIDEOS

TOPICS

Jenny Schade, president of JRS Consulting, has interviewed employees who were kept on after their companies had layoffs. The effects on these workers often mirror the struggles experienced by their laid off colleagues.

"The remaining employees are often expected to 'do more with less' and move forward," Schade says. "But that's hard to do when they feel depressed, numb and guilty about having made it through the chaos -- classic symptoms of survivor's guilt."

The guilt impacts not only your personal life, but also your relationships with your ex-co-workers.

"The most uncomfortable part of a job loss is the elephant in the room -- the person who has lost his job may not want to volunteer the information and the other person is at a loss for what to say," Schade says. "By saying, 'I was sorry to hear about your job. Anything I can do to help?' you're addressing the situation and immediately offering your support."

Support is still worthwhile, even if you don't have a job opportunity to offer, Schade adds. "You might offer to review a résumé or you may 'know someone who knows someone' and can help make a connection."

Schade has guidelines to help layoff survivors feel comfortable maintaining their relationship with ex-colleagues:

- Let your friend guide the discussion. "If he or she changes the subject, let it go. But, if he or she wants to talk, be ready to listen and offer support. Just reflecting the other person's feelings can feel very supportive," Schade says.
- Listen. "Focus on listening, but be sensitive about asking too many questions," Schade explains. "Asking, 'How many job interviews do you have lined up?' can sound intrusive. It's fine if your friend volunteers information but don't ask questions that may make him or her feel stressed."
- Maintain the relationship. "Sometimes the worst part of losing a job comes two months later when not much is happening," Schade reminds. "Invite your friend to lunch (and be sure to pay) or send a supportive note saying he or she is in your thoughts."

Guilt and confusion

Between restructures and layoffs, companies are undergoing dramatic shifts that can leave employees confused.

For example, Buffy Martin Tarbox was let go from her position as a director last August, along with 55 other employees. Fortunately she was hired back six weeks later -- but for an entry-level position.

"My co-workers were unsure as how to treat a person who had been in a supervisor role, laid off from that job but returned in a completely different position," Tarbox says. "Plus, I felt guilty that so many of my co-workers that had lost their jobs were no longer employed but that I had found another position in the organization."

News of her return was met with mixed emotions from her former colleagues, who didn't understand why she'd want to go back to the employer who had just let her go, and from those who worried about how she'd be able to adjust to a new job title. Not to mention the employees who knew her when she was higher on the totem pole.

"When I returned to the office following my layoff, I noticed how quickly the apologies from co-workers about what had happened came forth," she remembers. "Another interesting aspect was that my former department, the one I had directed, rarely spoke to me. Most wouldn't even return my phone calls. Prior to the layoff, I had close relationships with my department, so I found this perplexing."

Layoffs always breed high emotions and confusing circumstances. Considering the uneven situation of the economy, stories like Tarbox's are likely to continue as employers rehire some people and move others around.

While no strict etiquette for how to act as a layoff survivor exists (or as a laid off worker who then becomes an employee again), the best anyone can do is follow Schade's advice to stay sensitive and keep the lines of communication open.

*Paul C. requested that his full name not be used. [E-mail to a friend](#) | [Mixx it](#) | [Share](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

COPYRIGHT CAREERBUILDER.COM 2009. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. THE INFORMATION CONTAINED IN THIS ARTICLE MAY NOT BE PUBLISHED, BROADCAST OR OTHERWISE DISTRIBUTED WITHOUT THE PRIOR WRITTEN AUTHORITY

All About [Jobs and Labor](#) • [Layoffs and Downsizing](#)

Ads by Google

Mass Layoff, No Notice?

Employer failed to give advance notice of mass layoffs? Contact us.

www.girardgibbs.com/WARN_Act

Worried About A Layoff?

Safeguard Yourself; Find 70,000 Jobs Paying Over \$100,000

www.TheLadders.com

Best New Career Book

Get or keep the job you want A Not-So-Serious Career Handbook

blogs.jobdig.com/wwds/dig-your-job/

We Recommend

Stories you may be interested in based on past browsing

[Nanny: I was the expense they cut](#)

CNNMoney.com: [Here comes your stimulus bonus](#)

[What to say when a friend gets the heave-ho](#)

[New face of infidelity](#)

[Michelle Obama: Happiness tied to how I feel](#)

[EMAIL](#) [SAVE](#) [PRINT](#)

▼ **Sound Off:** Your opinions and comments

Sara
updated March 31, 2009
Sympathy for those who are more fortunate, seriously? This article is borderline offensive to the millions of good people (or assets) who have lost employment. People are unemployed, not stupid. Sob stories about the ...**more**

Hazel
updated March 31, 2009
"Escorted out of the building?" It makes it sound like being laid off is the same as being fired or committing a crime... I sure wouldn't stand for an employer treating me like that.

Amy
updated March 31, 2009
I was given the workload of a downsized colleague, in addition to my own never-ending pile of work. I had no time for survivor's guilt.

[Next 25 comments »](#)

This story is no longer available for comments, though you may read comments that were posted previously. Browse other stories for new opportunities to comment on the latest news.

► **From the Blogs:** Controversy, commentary, and debate

Top News



Clinton backs talks with moderate Taliban



India, China power will grow, Singapore predicts

[Home](#) | [Asia](#) | [Europe](#) | [U.S.](#) | [World](#) | [World Business](#) | [Technology](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [World Sport](#) | [Travel](#)
[Podcasts](#) | [Blogs](#) | [CNN Mobile](#) | [RSS Feeds](#) | [Email Alerts](#) | [CNN Radio](#) | [CNNAvantGo](#) | [Site Map](#)

POWERED BY
Google

SEARCH