



Coping with Corporate Instability

Airline employees exhibit classic symptoms in response to career threats that result from instability in their employment environment.

by

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Research findings indicate that when a worker suffers threats to employment or actual job loss, he or she may experience a grieving process similar to the sadness related to divorce, chronic illness or the death of a loved one. The job losses experienced by many professional airline pilots following the economic fluctuations brought about by oil embargoes, deregulation, airline acquisitions and mergers, and the resulting instability of working conditions, have made a certain amount of grieving inevitable.

The ups and downs of a number of factors can leave the pilot — and other airline employees — feeling confused and frustrated. Like the victim of an emotional roller coaster, his feelings about the airline may alternate between cycles of loyalty, hope and commitment followed by anxiety, anger and fear of what the future may bring. Those factors include:

- proposed salary, benefits and work rule changes
- announcements of company profits — or pension problems
- seniority list merger issues
- sale of assets, equipment or routes
- loss of vacations
- rumors of job opportunities at other carriers

One of the best ways for a person to adjust to the changes in life and the feelings of loss he may be experiencing is

to understand some of the common symptoms that accompany career instability and job loss.

Physical symptoms include: deficits in task performance, ulcers, alcoholism, hypertension, injuries, lack or increase of appetite, sleeplessness or oversleeping, knots or emptiness in pit of stomach, tightness in throat, shaky legs, headaches, stomach aches, repeated sighing to get your breath, trembling and fatigue. Also, chest pains, general achiness, difficulty in swallowing, digestive disorders (indigestion, nausea, diarrhea), feeling weak or faint, tension, temporary paralysis of limb or loss of sight, inability to concentrate, listlessness and restlessness.

Relationship symptoms include: family disruptions, alienation of family members, family violence, separation/divorce, low-quality marital/family communication, low family harmony and increasing levels of family hostility.

It is helpful to recognize that these symptoms may be part of a reaction to work events and to know that any combination of them may emerge any time during the stages of grief usually experienced by employees in an unstable corporate environment. Employees experiencing these symptoms should schedule a physical examination to rule out other causes, and should maintain a healthy routine of good nutrition, adequate rest, exercise and relaxation.

Are You Affected?

If you are in an unstable corporate environment and are affected by these symptoms, the following information may help you to develop a better understanding of reactions to work stress that may occur, diminish and reoccur, and will help identify where you are now. The five stages of grief and loss include: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

Stage I — Denial

If you find yourself saying, “That can’t be true!” or “No, that will never happen here,” then you are probably at the denial stage. Initially, denial functions as a buffer after unexpected, shocking news. It allows you to collect yourself, buy time to act, plan, manage and deal with facts gradually.

If overused, denial can become self-destructive. You can get stuck at the denial stage. It no longer produces positive outcomes. Denial can prevent you from making the necessary preparations for both present and possible future losses. Denial strangles decision-making and problem-solving.

The following are characteristics of persons in the denial stage:

Procrastination. “There’s time. I don’t have to make a decision yet.” “Things have to get better.” The pilot avoids information that makes him think about a decision and may only look at positive information.

Shifting Responsibility. “I’m just supposed to do my job and that’s all I can do.” “It’s Congress’, the union’s my family’s the company’s ... fault.” The pilot limits his information-gathering and decision-making. Instead, the pilot blames others, or seeks out and depends on others to take over.

Selective Exposure. “I heard that Congress might regulate the airlines.” “The company is starting to hire. It’s just a matter of time.” The pilot actively searches and selects information that supports the easiest, least objectionable alternative. He avoids any contradictory information.

Denial Behavior

Following are certain behaviors that can be expected at the denial stage. How many of the following statements are true for you?

- I avoid talking or reading about the airline.
- I change the subject or get angry at any mention

of work problems.

- I try to diminish or ignore the seriousness of potentially dangerous situations such as physical or mental health symptoms, threats to seniority, pensions, work rules and other career concerns, flight safety issues, future job decisions or mounting family concerns.
- I intellectualize the emotional impact of job pressures on self and family.
- I rationalize cuts and losses while ignoring their long-term impact on financial difficulties and emotional well-being.

Getting Past Denial

Here are three important ways that can help get you past denial:

Control. Get as much accurate, unbiased information as possible. Problem-focused preparation helps a situation seem more predictable and thus will raise your confidence and sense of control.

Begin to control worrying. The “work of worrying” is a beneficial process that enables you to prepare for difficulties or danger by looking at pros and cons, by considering possibilities and consequences, and by identifying worst possible scenarios. Worrying is a beneficial coping mechanism *if contained and controlled*. It is harmful if it consumes all of your time and energy, immobilizing you in the process.

Contain worrying to a specific time of day and a specific place. Do not allow yourself to worry at any other time or place. If unwanted thoughts begin to intrude at other times during the day or in other places, mentally imagine a big red “Warning Light” and tell yourself “STOP.” Keep it out of the cockpit!

Support From Others. One of the most effective coping devices is to use the support of your family, friends and other pilots. Giving and receiving help preserves human dignity, provides individual expression and lessens one’s feelings of isolation and aloneness.

Educating yourself, your family, friends, co-workers, and the public about the realities of work stress and its consequences allows others to understand the difficulties you face each day. It is a necessary first step in giving and receiving support.

Hope and Illusion. A person can be in a helpless situation and yet feel hopeful. Although one is aware of the negative aspects of a situation, the person focuses on the positive aspects and possible outcomes. In this way, hope differs from denial. With hope, you accept present reality but focus on a positive future.

Illusion is a form of denial that many people use to sustain them through difficult struggles. Psychologists believe that illusions are necessary for positive mental health. Coping illusions include: beliefs, wishes, dreams, fantasies, art, music, philosophy and pretending.

Stage 2 — Anger

“Why couldn’t it have been someone else?” “Why my airline?” “Why me?” If you find yourself asking these questions then you have probably arrived at the next stage in the grief process, anger.

Depending on your personality and your lifestyle, anger can show up in a variety of ways. These include: jealousy, meanness, a pouting silence, unfriendliness, irritability, dissatisfaction, depression, guilt, anxiety, verbal aggression and physical violence.

This stage is more difficult for family and for others. If the source of the anger is too powerful or dangerous to identify and deal with directly, anger may be aimed unconsciously at someone or something else. In the case of an airline company, pilots may feel powerless against the apparent source of their anger. A pilot who is angry about his loss of vacations or a paycheck that is smaller than expected may take it out on those who are closest, or on those who are enjoying those benefits and working conditions which the pilot fears losing or has already lost.

The following checklist provides a personal inventory for identifying anger. A person experiencing several of these statements is probably in a stage of anger.

Anger Checklist

- I feel that I will burst or explode.
- I feel like striking out and I am always holding myself back.
- My insides are churning.
- I am easily irritated, ready to snap.
- I want to say something nasty, something that will hurt someone.
- I keep thinking about getting even, getting revenge.
- I lie awake at night thinking about the things that I heard at work.
- My face and mouth are tight, tense and rigid.
- I keep thinking about what happened over and over again.
- My teeth and jaw are clenched.
- I continue searching for an explanation, for some understanding.
- I keep asking, “Why?”
- I have a tight knotted feeling in my stomach.

- My blood pressure goes up; my blood seems to boil.
- I have an impulse to hurt, hit, smash, pound or do something that will hurt.

Is Your Anger Unhealthy?

Are you feeling distanced and disconnected from your family, spouse, children and friends? Are you experiencing severe headaches, gastrointestinal disorders, respiratory disorders, more frequent illness and insomnia? Are you engaging in self-destructive behaviors such as drinking, drugs, smoking, overeating, and reckless behavior? Do you stay angry for longer periods of time than usual? Does your anger seem to go on and on? Are you blaming others for your situation and your difficulties? Do you frequently overreact to situations that previously may have seemed trivial? Do small irritations and frustrations upset you more than usual? Do your interactions with crew members, your family and friends tend to be more aggressive or more withdrawn? Are you using phrases in your thoughts and speech that express your intense feelings? “I’ve had it!” “I’m ready to explode!” “I can’t take this anymore!”

When Is Anger Healthy?

Anger is a step in the grief process, and if handled properly, it can be the catalyst that moves a pilot toward productive problem-solving decisions and actions.

Read the following statements and decide if your anger is benefiting you.

You channel your anger into energy for decision-making and problem-solving. You acknowledge, “I am angry about what has happened to me and to the airline.” You express feelings verbally and in a controlled way to your spouse or close friend. You release anger through physical outlets such as jogging, tennis, swimming or other activities, or indirectly through emotional outlets such as movies or plays.

Remember, *feeling* angry is normal. It is okay to be angry at the chain of events — corporate, political and economic - that have impacted you. It is not okay to blame yourself, to blame others not involved, to jeopardize your job, or to act out your anger in a destructive way.

Stage 3 — Bargaining

During this phase, the pilot hopes that bargaining will save the day. The pilot might bargain with himself, “Maybe, if I take this last pay cut then that will be it.” Or, “If I just hang in there and do my job, the company will treat me fairly.” Survival bargaining, a panicky

perception of imminent disaster, or surrender to having already lost, may be tied to feelings of loss of self-esteem, apathy or lack of confidence in a pilot's ability to do anything else but fly.

How To Insure That Bargaining Is Healthy:

- Collect the facts.
- Know your options.
- Do what you can do to insure you "get" as well as "give."
- Separate business logic from emotional logic.
- Pay attention to the feelings you have that coexist with compromise. Are you threatened by compromise? Does it feel like surrender? Consider another way to satisfy, preserve, take care of that area of yourself that is threatened — and still compromise.
- Establish what reassurances you need. "If I agree to ... I need ..."
- Know your "bottom line."
- Have a plan for what will be your next step if that bottom line is reached.

Stage 4 — Depression

"Yes, this is happening to me, and there is no way out." At this point, you can no longer deny the disappointments, changes or losses that are occurring in your company and in your life. Eventually anger and rage are replaced by a sense of great sorrow, sadness, loss and dismay. Financial problems, marital conflicts, loss of family leisure time and the growing distance between you and persons you were once so close too, add to the feelings of sadness, guilt and hopelessness.

During the depression stage you may find that you are not interested in much of anything, that it is an effort just to get out of bed each day. You may have an overwhelming feeling of tiredness or dread at the thought of your next trip. Life may seem confused and disorganized.

Any time depression interferes with one's ability to enjoy life, work and love, then depression must be faced and dealt with. The low-grade, chronic depression most often associated with work stress is probably the most difficult to address because it has been a part of daily life for so long. Its damage is often gradual and goes without notice. Depression is most easily treated in its early stages before it affects your work, health and relationships with others.

In order to judge the seriousness of a depressive mood, consider the following two factors: the severity of the low mood, and the length of time it has persisted. Aware-

ness of symptoms helps identify depression; seek professional aid if the symptoms are chronic or severe.

The signs of depression include: fatigue or loss of energy, difficulty sleeping, change in appetite, loss of interest in formerly pleasurable activities (especially sexual activities), feelings of worthlessness or guilt, poor concentration and thoughts of suicide or death.

Clinical work and research with airline pilots indicate that depression or depressed mood is a chronic symptom among pilots working under highly stressful and unstable working conditions. The consequences of depression are serious; rate yourself on the following scale.

The Self-Rating Depression Scale

Rate each question on a scale of 1 to 5 (1=Never 2=Rarely 3=Sometimes 4=Often 5=Always). Place a number in the blank that indicates the degree to which each item presently causes you stress.

- I feel downhearted and blue.
- I have trouble sleeping at night and feel tired in the morning.
- I do not eat as much as I used to.
- I no longer enjoy sex.
- I am losing weight.
- I become tired for no reason.
- My mind is not as clear as it used to be.
- I find it difficult to do the things I used to do.
- I am restless and can not keep still.
- I have little hope about the future.
- I am more irritable than usual.
- I find it difficult to make decisions.
- I do not feel useful or needed.
- My life seems empty.
- I wonder if anyone would miss me if I never came back.
- I no longer enjoy the things that I used to enjoy.
- I have nothing to look forward to.
- I no longer get together with friends or socialize.
- My life seems dull and worthless.
- I seem unable to concentrate.
- My energy level is insufficient to accomplish necessary/desirable tasks.

Scoring:

- One- and two-ratings indicate that you are not experiencing depression.
- A three-rating indicates that you experience occasional symptoms of depressive mood, and suggests that you can benefit from coping strategies to prevent symptoms from worsening. If several three-ratings cluster, these are the specific areas

you need to address.

- Four- and five-ratings indicate that you are experiencing depression. Several of these ratings indicate a need for you to take action, see your physician, and seek counseling, if that is recommended.

Coping With Depression

If you believe that you may be in the depression stage, the following suggestions will help you begin a program of coping:

- Concentrate on those areas that you have control over now, (your health, home projects, job performance, learning experiences, hobbies, social activities).
- Choose daily tasks and chores that can be accomplished.
- Set realistic goals. Do not move too fast or set false expectations.
- Recognize your emotional and physical trends. Acknowledge them and when possible make adjustments to meet your needs.
- Each day, choose one enjoyable activity for yourself.
- Exercise daily. Research indicates that exercise releases chemicals in the body that reduce depression.
- Spend time with friends and family. Take the time to make a phone call on a trip or a layover.

Time to Reflect

As you progress through the grief and loss process you may wonder “Am I normal?” “Am I going crazy?” “Will I ever get over this?” “Will it ever stop?”

Practically any physical or emotional reaction is possible during the grief process. When unusual behavior occurs, people naturally begin to worry.

If the reaction manifests violence towards yourself or others; if it is so intense that normal functioning is impaired; if behavior is erratic or unpredictable; or if the reaction continues for a long period of time without any indication of abatement or change, then you are experiencing an abnormal reaction rather than a normal and healthy grief and loss response.

The following checklist will help you see how you are progressing through the grief process. If you complete the checklist again in about three to six months you may find that fewer areas concern you and thus measure your progress. As time passes, you will discover that you answer “yes” to more questions.

Indicators That I Am Effectively Coping With Stressful Work Events:

- Am I able to laugh, to do something nice for myself without feeling guilty?
- Can I really enjoy being out with friends for an evening?
- Am I able to sit quietly by myself and think of things other than my job or my problems?
- Do I take an interest in current events and the news other than airline issues?
- Do I look forward to outings, trips and special events?
- Am I able to do the routine tasks at home and at work that I am used to doing?
- Am I involved in activities that I used to enjoy?
- Can I talk about my job and career without showing strong emotion (sadness, anger, jealousy)?
- Do I pay attention to my surroundings (beautiful scenery, the taste of food, a pleasant smell)?
- Am I able to get a good night’s sleep and awaken feeling rested?
- Am I able to concentrate on work and on conversations with others?
- Am I less forgetful and thinking more clearly?
- Do I feel stronger and more in control (coping better with daily routines, frustrations and crises)?
- Am I able to deal with everyday life without feeling panicked, frantic or excessively worried?
- Do I feel there is meaning to my life regardless of what happens at work?
- Can I look back at my losses and feel that growth, understanding and something good has resulted?
- Can I look forward and know, “I will survive.”

Stage 5 — Acceptance

You have now read about the normal range of emotional reactions that typically accompany work stress and corporate instability.

As the work environment becomes less stressful and your career becomes more stable and secure, you would eventually reach a point where you could work through the grief process, and the emotional roller coaster you have been experiencing could subside.

When a company remains unstable for long periods of time, when management decisions and actions appear unpredictable or erratic, when operations appear to be conducted with a “management by crisis” outlook, the intense feelings accompanying the stages of grief return, again and again, without resolution.

The acceptance phase is not necessarily a happy or joyful stage. Rather, it is a time for gaining understanding,

for gathering resolve, and for taking possible action. Your energy level will improve and your physical and emotional reactions will abate. You will feel more alive, ready to cope, and ready to enjoy life again. ♦

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