

SURVIVOR GUILT

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With the massive reductions in force in recent years, companies, and their HR professionals, are seeing a greatly increased incidence of survivor guilt within their workforce. Survivor guilt follows any experience in which friends and loved ones have suffered trauma that the survivor could also have experienced. Survivors often feel they let their loved ones down and are unworthy of having survived.

Surviving employees are likely to have the following thoughts, emotions, and experiences:

1. Why do I have to still have a job when so many I respect were let go?
2. Is it only a matter of time before I lose my job too? Can I trust my company or should I start making plans now?
3. I feel guilty having an income while friends are struggling to survive.
4. I feel badly for friends who were let go, but I don't know what to do or say.
5. I have trouble sleeping. I feel tired, uneasy, and experience vague body aches and pains.
6. I feel depressed, have a poor appetite, or find myself craving and eating high-fat, high-sugar foods. I'm using more pain relievers and drinking more.
7. If I reach out to former coworkers, will that jeopardize my relationship with the company?
8. HR professionals who were assigned to operationalize the terminations may find themselves ruminating over what they might have done differently. There are no flawless ways of doing terminations.

It's hard being an HR professional these days. We tend to be altruists and like to see people thrive, but that altruism makes us all the more prone to survivor guilt.

Here are some things you can do for your company and yourself:

- (i) Encourage your company to offer competent outplacement services with a track record of lateral placements.
- (ii) Remind your employer that all eyes are on how it handles terminations. Showing sensitivity gives a message to those remaining on how they are valued.
- (iii) Be a listener. Listening is one of the most comforting things we can do for a fellow human being. They aren't asking for answers. They want understanding and empathy. Just listen and try to understand how the other person is feeling.
- (iv) Give those you must terminate lists of locally available resources, including material on networking, identifying skills that can be applied to positions in more promising fields, and finding social and emotional support.
- (v) Always convey hope. Hope mobilizes us in staying the course and overcoming difficulties.

Many companies concerned about sabotage have a guard escort terminated employees out the door. Do not put your personnel through this walk of shame. Handle termination in a private and discrete manner. Show respect. Express willingness to supply references or give leads if you know of any. Treating terminated employees with respect will not only protect the company from sabotage but maintain more positive relationships with remaining employees.

Punishing yourself for something you cannot control helps no one. Instead of taking on guilt, forgive yourself and focus on what you can do for others. Exercise as much as your health status permits. Follow a healthy diet. Seek support of family and friends. See a counselor if that helps you maintain perspective. You can be useful in helping others only if you take care of yourself.

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