
Unemployment can make you ill

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The link between unemployment and poor health has always been known, but never systematically researched until now. It had been generally noted that good physical health reflected mental resilience and alertness - qualities that would get you selected for jobs - and that ill people were simply more likely to stay unemployed.

But new research suggests a reverse effect: That people who are laid off are at higher risk of being diagnosed later with hypertension, heart disease and even arthritis, than those who keep their jobs.

Based on a study of 8,000 workers interviewed at two-yearly intervals, it was found that people who lost their jobs, even if they soon found another, were 83 per cent more likely to report a new health problem than those who had never lost their jobs - a figure that was constant, whether or not the job losses were due to the business closing down.

In other words, it did not show that people were being fired because of illness.

Well, that mention of hypertension certainly rang a bell with me as a stress consultant and I knew we were back in the familiar cycle of stress impacting on physical health and vice-versa.

Last month, I counselled an air accident investigator, Jeffrey, who had just lost his job.

Deeply depressed, he was feeling in confessional mode, admitting that he originally chose that job because he wanted to feel important.

He'd been still at school when the big Tenerife disaster happened (two jumbos colliding on the runway), and he was struck by how everybody hung on the words of the accident investigators with a sort of hushed respect.

Even though he mostly worked on ground, Jeffrey's mind was often in the cockpit, mentally up above the clouds at 10,000 metres.

Now this drooped and shapeless figure on the sofa was barely recognisable, having utterly lost his identity.

I told him to remember his frank, honest confession - that he had wanted to feel important - and to start to regain that feeling by building some self-respect, and getting in the right state of mind and body.

Then I told him not to view himself as unemployed, but time rich. "Think of all that time you could be utilising, which your old colleagues can't."

That made me feel it was time to mention social networking, and the difference it can make to career planning and self-marketing - quite apart from social life.

At first, he sounded sceptical, probably because he had always worked for government departments or large manufacturers, far removed from social networking.

But when I checked up on him the other day, he looked me properly in the eye, a bit more like a man with a mission. And I reckon he'd lost six or seven pounds. When I got home, I came across him on Facebook.

I've got a feeling Jeffrey is going to survive this recession!

Key points: Health and work

- Unhealthy people have always been less likely to get jobs
- Good physical health reflects mental resilience and alertness
- New research shows that unemployment can cause illness
- Today's jobless should exploit social networking on the web

- The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy, based in London.