There has been lot of talk in Australian health workplaces about redundancy and a number of callers to the Bush Support Services line recently have been made redundant, or know someone who has or is facing the possibility.

How an individual responds to being made redundant differs. People who cope best with redundancy are those that see it as an opportunity to take a break; look for a new adventure. They may rest, travel, take up a new field of study or do volunteer work. Or they may engage in practical job-seeking activities.

However, for other people, redundancy is devastating. It creates a psychological response similar to the loss and grief that is experienced when an important relationship breaks up or when someone close dies. It is a generalisation, but health workers are notoriously bad at accepting that they may be struggling to cope and it is important to remember that redundancy is likely to result in a whole spectrum of negative emotions from shock and denial to anger and depression. All these negative emotions need to be recognised and managed.

With the global financial crisis, redundancy is an issue facing people in many industries. Annmaree Wilson, Senior Clinical Psychologist with Bush Support Services, says the psychological impact of redundancy is increasingly being recognised.

“He who bends to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy
But he who kisses the Joy as it flies
Lives in eternity’s sunrise”

-William Blake
The Stages

One of the ways of understanding what happens when someone is made redundant is to understand it in terms of a grief and loss cycle. There is no doubt about it: losing your job is a huge loss. It signals a loss of earnings, of companionship, of the structure of your days. But it must not be the end of the world for you. It is important to remember that loss and grief is a cycle that has a number of stages that may be repeated at different times.

The first stage is usually one of shock and disbelief. During this stage, people generally report feeling emotionally numb and detached. They may report that they feel like they are “just going through the motions” of daily activities and not really feeling anything.

The second stage is usually about depression. Feeling low and blue, having poor self-esteem, appetite loss or gain, and sleep loss when you lose your job is absolutely normal. However, if it persists longer than about six months you need to seek professional help.

The other side of the depression coin is anger. Anger doesn’t necessarily mean you hit out physically at people. Anger clouds your thinking in a very negative way and ekes out in the form of cynicism and sarcasm. Anger can affect all aspects of your life, not just work, so it is really important to recognise and deal with it.

One of the sources of anger that is difficult to deal with when someone is made redundant is a sense of injustice. People often report feeling outraged that they have been “singled out” or that the actions of their employers is unjust and they feel betrayed. They might spend a great deal of time trying to piece together a narrative, which may or may not be factual, about why the redundancy has occurred. Past experiences of being rejected may be triggered.

There are other emotions that fuel feelings of anger, which people who have been made redundant may experience. One of them is embarrassment. People who have been made redundant often feel judged by others. They feel as if the redundancy reflects their work performance, which in most cases it does not. There tends to be less embarrassment when lots of people in a workforce are made redundant but nevertheless it is factor that needs to be recognised and dealt with.

The other emotion that may come into play is fear. Of course, the biggest fear often faced by people experiencing redundancy is fear of financial difficulties. One of the most common fears, and the most realistic, we hear on the BSS line is about how people will pay their mortgages when they have been made redundant. The other fear that surfaces when there is talk of redundancy is a fear of a loss of identity. Health workers, in particular, often have their whole identity caught up in their jobs and they start to feel totally unravelled when this is compromised.

The final stage of the loss cycle is acceptance. Acknowledging what has been lost is an important step in acceptance. The other important step is ‘moving on’. What this step of ‘moving on’ looks like will vary from person to person. It may be about finding a new job or a new way of seeing yourself. Whatever ‘moving on’ looks like, it will involve a decision to let go of your grief. You will know you are in an acceptance stage when you start setting goals again.
Ways of Dealing with Redundancy

• Make sure you know your rights: One of the most practical ways of dealing with redundancy or the threat of redundancy is to stay informed about your rights as a worker. You will have entitlements and you need to know what these are. Your employer should give you this information. Alternatively your union or professional association are good places to seek the information you need.

• Have a financial contingency plan: In this day and age, it’s unrealistic to think that any job you have will be a job for life. In fact, redundancy may occur to you several times over your working life. It’s important to pre-empt this and to have a financial contingency plan. Seek professional financial advice.

• Talk about it: People often say: “What is the point of talking about things? Talking changes nothing.” However, this is untrue. Making thoughts and feelings conscious by talking or writing helps make connections and meaning. By talking about things, we are reminded about how we have coped in the past and that gives us some idea about ways of coping in the present. By not talking, issues remain unresolved. So if you are dealing with redundancy, talk to friends, family or call BSS and work things through.

• Think about your thinking: Negative thinking is a disease and it’s contagious! Tap into the sorts of thing you are saying to yourself about being made redundant. Are you blaming yourself? Are you blaming your boss? Are you assuming that everyone is looking at you and wondering about your competency? Do you feel like you have let your family down? Once you have identified these negative thoughts, you need to challenge yourself and turn those thoughts into positives.

• The other factor in terms of thinking has to do with loss in general, not just losing your job. Loss is an inevitable part of life and dealing with loss, such as being made redundant, can be an important part of living a meaningful life.

• Don’t panic – remember to breathe: Working in remote settings can be stressful. It’s important that you have daily exercise, diet and relaxation strategies in place even before the going gets tough. Simple breathing exercises and mindfulness techniques are excellent disciplines to have as coping strategies. Ring BSS for more details or do a BSS workshop.

• Don’t have all your identity eggs in the work basket: Of course, work is important. But research has shown that the single most important factor in determining individual happiness is not work but individual connections and having an activity that you are passionate about. These things can give us important feedback about who we are... so work on these things before you lose your job!

• Come up with a plan and set some new goals: This could be as simple as making a list of things that you need to do and then prioritising the items on the list. If you are job-seeking, don’t only think about work in the same field; think about the skills and life experiences that you have that are transferable.

• Stay connected: Sometimes people don’t realise how much they rely on their workmates for feeling connected to the world until they lose their jobs. Make sure you work on sustainable relationships with friends and family, outside of the workplace. Use social media or join a club.

• Carpe diem and stay tuned in: One of the problems that unemployed people report is that they fill their days with activities that help them tune out. This includes spending too much time in bed during the day; spending excessive hours watching television, surfing the net or playing internet games; eating or drinking too much. It’s really important for your overall wellbeing that you seize the day and bring some new and different discipline into it. Cooking, cleaning and washing the dog are all important activities.

And remember BSS is available on 1800 805 391 for you to talk to 24 hours/7 days per week.