

## Chapter 9

# MAINTAINING POSITIVE SELF ESTEEM DURING THE JOB SEARCH

by Diane Byster

How is it that some job seekers manage a career transition better than others? Perhaps they are more resilient in how they respond when things do not go as planned. What factors contribute to a more resilient constitution? Jennifer Crocker, Ph.D., a faculty member at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, has been researching the topic of self-esteem for over 20 years. According to Crocker, most people suffer from what she describes as “domain contingent self-esteem.” In other words, many are dependent on external sources of self-worth such as attractiveness, school achievement, popularity, and job performance. If we are unable to succeed in the areas where we have attached our self-worth, we are more likely to experience shame, anger, anxiety and a subsequent drop in self-esteem. Our mood is not the only area impacted by pursuing external sources of self-worth. Crocker observes that our stress levels increase and self-awareness decreases, which commonly results in sleep and exercise disruptions, binge eating, alcohol or substance abuse and relationship conflicts. Longer disruptions in sleep and appetite can often result with the onset of depression and anxiety disorders.

### How Self Esteem Operates

Being depressed or anxious directly affects how we behave. For instance, when we perceive that we are in danger of failing, such as not landing a hoped-for position, we will typically procrastinate, attempt to be perfect or “self-handicap.” The latter is a form of self-defeating behavior where we make excuses so we can save face in the event of failure. A job seeker employing this strategy, for example, might “accidentally” miss the application deadline for a desirable job because he is obsessed with trying to construct the perfect resume and cover letter. This same job seeker might suddenly develop a debilitating headache on the day of the job interview. Therefore, if he gets passed up for the position, he will never know for sure whether it was his interview skills or that he was not feeling up to par that made him lose the job. We are more likely to adopt a “handicap” when a dearly-held self-concept is put to the test. Self-handicapping, perfectionism and procrastination can be effective ways to manage performance anxiety. However, in the long run, adopting these strategies thwarts our goals and makes it exceedingly

difficult to live up to our potential. It seems that we would rather sacrifice success at a task we are embarking on, than risk possible injury to our self esteem.

The implications for the job search are compelling. ~~If we base our self-worth on the results of our job search efforts, we are especially vulnerable to feeling badly about ourselves every time a rejection letter rolls in.~~ Our difficulties are compounded because with each successive "failure" we quell our growing fears and anxieties by taking fewer risks and engaging in less exploratory behavior. Ironically, these are the very skills that we need to cultivate in order to increase the probability of success in today's tight job market! Sounds like a familiar double bind? ~~So, how do we stay motivated and continue to take risks despite uncertain outcomes?~~

Crocker suggests ~~abandoning the dysfunctional sources of self-esteem~~ that make us more vulnerable to downward changes in mood and unproductive behavior. In other words, we must shift our attention away from ~~performance-based goals~~—those focused on a desired outcome. A common performance goal in the job search is to measure our self-worth on receiving an appropriate job offer or multiple offers. In this way of thinking, every time the outcome of our efforts does not match our expectations, we're setting ourselves up to experience failure, personal rejection and a sense of "scarcity consciousness." The "scarcity mentality professes that there is not enough to go around and that we had better fight to get our small piece of the pie," according to Denise Bissonnette, publisher of *True Livelihood Newsletter*. In this Darwinian view, Bissonnette argues, "we are all in competition with each other; it is a dog eat dog world." Not a very comforting, much less inspiring climate for job prospecting, is it?

### **Focus on Learning Goals**

A genuine alternative to performance-based goals, Crocker asserts, is to focus our energy on learning goals. The objective in this approach is the ~~path of learning, not the result.~~ Operating from this stance, the job seeker could use ~~her exploration activities to discern industry trends,~~ learn about ~~specific training requirements~~ to secure a particular position, or develop a deeper understanding of her own work preferences, such as values, interests and personal style. Failure is viewed as a learning experience ~~and an opportunity~~ to stretch ourselves beyond our comfort zone. How might this alternative strategy be applied to a job search? Instead of measuring our self-worth based on job offers, we could instead frame the job search and career planning as an "adventure," according to authors John Krumboltz, Ph.D., and Al Levin, Ed.D. This life juncture represents a unique opportunity to ~~meet new people we ordinarily~~

would not come in contact with, discover areas that excite our imagination, experiment with new roles [such as internships and volunteer opportunities], and reality-test areas of interest.

### Alternative Strategies

Robert Chope, Ph.D., founding member of the Career and Personal Development Institute, suggests that some clients consider being a "walk-on," by proposing to a potential employer to do something--without pay--that would benefit the organization. This allows the client to develop new skills, find out whether that kind of work is enjoyable, and possibly become a valuable resource for the employer. In some cases, this could lead to a paying position down the road. In the new economy, Chope believes that many would benefit by rethinking the traditional model of one full-time job. He suggests cultivating a portfolio career, where an individual generates multiple income streams. If one stream dries up, there are other skills to fall back on. In this approach, the portfolio worker re-envisions himself more like an actor, where he is continually prospecting for new roles and opportunities, not just searching as a one-time event. Consistent with Crocker's findings, Chope emphasizes that "it is the process and effort, not the outcome, that should be evaluated." By process, Chope is referring to the idiosyncratic way in which a job seeker conducts his activities to expose himself to a variety of new people, businesses and experiences.

To help increase our motivation, Crocker suggests that we remind ourselves that we always have a choice about how we relate to expected and unexpected life events and how we move through the world. For instance, after receiving an unanticipated rejection from a potential employer, job seekers often cope with the loss of control by making erroneous conclusions about the event and themselves such as: "I didn't get an offer from company X, so I will never get a job," or "the interviewers were expressionless during my interview, therefore they must have disliked me." Both statements contain commonly made thinking errors. The first is overgeneralization, or extrapolating from one event to make negative predictions about the future. In the second statement, the job seeker made an incorrect attribution about the reasons for the job rejection. Personalization is the tendency to interpret other people's reactions or behaviors as a reflection of oneself. The degree to which the job seeker aligns with this faulty thinking will inhibit proactive job searching. A more productive way to frame a job rejection might sound something like this: "I have not completed enough interviews to make any conclusions about my employability," or "Even though the interviewers were expressionless, I cannot make any conclusions about how I performed or whether they liked me." To shift from a reflexive to a more balanced style of thinking is a choice point

that involves cultivating an expanded awareness of the continually unfolding events of our lives. We are not merely victims of a sluggish economy. Our ability to construct meaning from what happens to us is a cornerstone of well-being.

### **New Thinking**

Thinking in this new way requires effort and conscious intention. Crocker points out that if we abandon our performance-based goals and ensuing unproductive behaviors, we will likely come face-to-face with our deepest fears and anxieties. In fact, it is these deeper fears that ultimately give rise to the formation of contingent patterns of self worth! To help us constructively face our fears and let go of an outmoded model of seeing ourselves, Crocker argues that we need more inclusive life goals—those that focus on benefits for oneself and for others. This kind of thinking represents a viable alternative to living in a continual state of “scarcity consciousness.” An inclusive goal might sound something like this: “How can I make a difference?” “What can I give?” or “How can I put my unique talents and skills to good use in my community?”

To illustrate the concept of moving from Personal performance goals to more inclusive goals, consider the case of a certified public accountant working for a Fortune 500 company. He sought the services of a career counselor because he experienced increased anxiety when giving presentations at work and was losing a sense of joy in life. Through counseling, the client discovered that the source of his anxiety and diminished pleasure was that he was not doing anything that he found personally meaningful. Rather than having to change careers, he instead changed settings and applied his accounting and financial management skills to a non-profit organization whose mission statement aligned with his personal values. As a result of focusing his talents on something that he truly believed in, the client became less anxious during presentations and developed a more positive outlook. Goals that focus exclusively on our own interests and needs, rather than on the well-being of ourselves and others, not only fail to build self-esteem, they actually activate and intensify our fears. This happens because it reinforces our isolation. Operating in survival mode also makes it easier to spiral into negative self-talk.

### **Conclusion**

We cannot control when we will receive an offer. We can, however, increase our odds and maintain positive self-esteem in these uncertain times by taking our learning into our own hands, by engaging in risk-taking behaviors despite uncertain outcomes, by focusing on those activities that will enhance our well-being and the well-being of others

and by remembering that we are always choice makers.

**About the author**

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