

Promoting Resiliency from Within

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[Renew EAPA
Membership](#)

[Visit EAP Career
Central](#)

[Find EA Services](#)

[Public CEAP Directory](#)

[Verify a CEAP](#)

[Search Member
Directory](#)

[About Employee
Assistance](#)

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[EAPA Members Only](#)

[CEAP Certification /
Credentialing](#)

[EAPA Learning Center](#)

[Annual World EAP
Conference](#)

[Journal of Employee
Assistance](#)

[Advertising /
Marketing
Opportunities](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Home](#) > [Journal of Employee Assistance](#) > [Read a back issue](#) > [Vol. 39 no.3 - 3rd Quarter 2009](#) > [Promoting Resiliency from Within](#)

Promoting Resiliency from Within

An EA professional finds that her experience working with laid-off employees provides her with the tools she needs to overcome the doubts and frustrations she feels when she finds herself in the same situation.

by Katrina Fowler, CEAP, LCDC

Katrina Fowler spent 29 years with a large internal EAP before being laid off.

Every Monday through Friday for the last 29 years (less the occasional vacation and holiday), I had a reason to get out of bed: I was an employee assistance professional in a large internal EAP. As so many people do, I tied my identity to my job. I was making a difference in people's lives. Others always told me I must really love my job due to the amount of hours I spent working. I guess you could say I was a workaholic.

Then one day in January, life as I knew it changed. I was let go from the company, a sign of the times to come. I became a statistic, one of many mid-career professionals who would suffer the same fate over the coming months. I now faced what could potentially be the worst period of my life, with the economy going from bad to worse and a husband who was already out of work.

Like many of the other hundreds of thousands of unemployed people in the United States and around the world, I had never gone through anything like this before. I had always been on the other side of the equation, the person telling a laid-off employee that everything would work out fine. It was a far easier job than the one I now faced.

Filling Your Container

I call this new obstacle in my life a job, because it requires me to step out of the comfort zone I had known for so long and into a new realm of self discovery. Some of the self discovery has been exciting and some has been disheartening, but all in all it has been a lot of hard work.

I keep reflecting on a training exercise I frequently used when making stress management presentations. I stop to think of the many things that are important to me: my family, friends, work, pets, hobbies, and, yes, even exercise. How I look at these is what makes me who I am.

The example I always used in my trainings was to tell people to think of themselves as a container. First, fill the container with all the things that are important to you. These things should take up much of the space. What's left—the in-between spaces—are filled with your obligations, the things you must (but often really don't want to) do.

As an EA professional, it was important that I show how not to let the obligations take up too much of the space. If they did, there wouldn't be enough space for the things that matter to you.

After I was laid off, I was faced with looking closely at how I was filling my own container. I am fortunate that my training as an EA professional has made this task a little easier. In today's uncertain economy, the EAP field will definitely play an important role in helping employees and their family members in their own journey of self discovery.

Experiencing Feelings of Self Doubt

The words of Reinhold Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer—"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference"—work well for those who find themselves unemployed.

I had heard from others over the years that when they lost their job, they also lost their work friends. I was sure this would not happen to me—after all, I had been well known within the company, and our work group was close. But, to my surprise, it did happen, and for a while I felt very alone.

Was it possible that I had gone from being well liked to an outcast due to the events of one day? Was the lack of contact due to "survivor guilt" among those who were still employed? Were they angry because they now had even more work to perform with fewer staff, or did they just not care?

This feeling of self doubt can either make or break you in a situation like this. That self doubt can lead to resistance, which can lead to depression and a lack of confidence in your ability and frustration. Worse, it can have negative effects on your health, your relationships, and your finances.

I learned that it is important to have a support network outside the office, as your co-workers might not be there for you should you be terminated. Since I was part of the EAP, I really did not feel there were any other resources for me to turn to within the company. After all, being the self-sufficient and experienced counselor

that I was, I knew who to call and what steps I needed to take to handle the emotional aspects of a lost job. But what I was not prepared for was the situation I would face at home with my family.

During dark times in your life, your family is as anxious about the future as you are. Many times they do not understand the expanse of the loss you are feeling—the loss of your job, your identity, your friends and your income. I had been “super woman,” a mom, a wife, an employee, and the person who could never say no. I thought I still had to be super woman for the family after the loss of my job. Since my husband was also out of work, I tried not only to keep his spirits up but also those of the rest of the family.

There were days when this was not an easy task. I soon realized that before I truly could be strong for them, I must first be strong for myself. Again, I drew strength from my employee assistance training. It was now time to practice what I had been preaching for so many years. I had to be resilient.

Choosing the Path of Resiliency

Having always been one to look at a glass as half full instead of half empty, I decided that enough was enough. I had to let go of who I had been and start working on the person I was becoming. I thought of a quote by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross: “People are like stained glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within.” It was time for me to find that light from within, and the first step I needed to take was to achieve closure with my past.

When faced with a situation such as a job loss, you are at a crossroads in your life. You can choose to embrace the experience, or you can let it run you down and mire you in depression and self doubt. So there I stood at the most important crossroad of my life, forced to choose between the road to resiliency and the road to depression.

I chose the path of resiliency. In Daryl Conner’s book, *Managing at the Speed of Change*, he lists five characteristics of resiliency:

1. Be positive. Your life is always changing and offers many challenges and opportunities.
2. Be focused. Take a good look at where you are going and stick to it. Don’t let barriers get in your way.
3. Be flexible. Keep an open mind about all the different possibilities that might await you.
4. Be organized. The unknown is scary. Develop structured approaches to help you manage the unknown.
5. Be proactive. Be ready to work with whatever the future holds for you.

Resilience is defined as the ability to recover from or adjust to misfortune or change. What I was going through definitely fell into this category. But where do you begin taking the path to resiliency and reinventing yourself?

I knew I could follow the steps outlined by Daryl Conner. I was positive, focused, flexible, organized (sort of) and definitely proactive. So I took the first step, maintaining a positive attitude during this time in my life. Yes, there were the occasional down days, especially when my resume was generating few if any responses. But I had to think of this as being given an opportunity that I might not have taken otherwise.

I would have been perfectly content, after 29 years, to stay on the job until I retired. But this situation has given me the opportunity to reinvent myself, to take with me the things I really enjoy and leave behind the less interesting. I know the reinventing process will not be easy and that there are old habits and ways of doing things that will need to change. I remind myself that I had only worked for one company my entire career, so the opportunity I now have before me is full of amazing possibilities. There is life outside my old company.

I am focused on where I want my career to go next. My one major concern is preventing those who are not supportive of my new goals from interfering with my positive and focused mental attitude. I keep my distance from these individuals as much as possible.

I feel fortunate to have worked in the EAP field because I learned that I do not have to look very far to find the path to discovery and resiliency. It starts from within.

The first thing I had to do was to let go of any ill feelings I might have about my situation. Although being laid off might not be what I would have chosen for myself, it happened and it’s my reality. I needed to embrace my new situation, but also let go of the past.

I also needed to show understanding and forgiveness, especially toward people in my support system who I felt had let me down. I had to realize that there are many reasons they were not there for me and that I could not take it personally. Carrying along the extra baggage of hurt and resentment will not help me on my new journey. I also want to make sure not to burn any bridges, as the new path I travel may have many smaller trails feeding into it. I may run into or need help from past acquaintances along my new journey.

It is with these things in mind that I decided to bring final closure with my past. I took a look at all the people I had cared about at work and asked myself what each of them had done to make a positive impact on my life and what I will remember most about them. I then wrote a note to everyone who had been important to me during my years on the job and told them about their special qualities. I couldn’t believe the feeling of peace that came over me when I hit SEND on the e-mail.

Fostering Organizational Resiliency

The EAP field, I feel, has an obligation to employers as well as employees to help foster the concept of resiliency. The things I have done to promote resiliency are certainly worth suggesting, but they are by no means all the strategies and tactics available to individuals who have lost their jobs.

However, resiliency is not only for those who have lost their jobs but also for those still on the job. The ideal scenario would be for a company to foster resiliency from upper management down to the department/team

level and ultimately to the employee.

It is also important for employee assistance professionals to work with management to ensure they understand the importance of communication, especially in uncertain times. With surviving employees facing the same amount of work but having fewer staff to deploy, it is important that management empower employees to take ownership of their work and provide the tools necessary to get the job done. It is equally important that management make sure employees are aware of the programs available to assist them and their family members, such as the EAP, work-life program, and wellness unit.

I feel I am now ready to start on my new journey. I am taking with me no extra unnecessary baggage, just a sense of excitement and wonder. Although the unknown is scary and the economy still has a way to go, I know I am going to be just fine. After all, my EAP counselor told me so...

Since writing this article, Katrina Fowler has been hired as executive director of Total Employee Assistance Management in Houston, Texas.

References

Conner, Daryl. 1993. *Managing at the speed of change: How resilient managers succeed and prosper where others fail*. New York: Villard Books.

[Top of Page](#)