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When Couples Cope With Job Loss: A Strategy for Developing and Testing Preventive Interventions

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Work is a fundamental determinant of how Americans feel about the quality of their life. In the past 15 years, employment has gained a central role in the lives of women as well as men, with married women and single mothers greatly increasing their participation in the workforce (Nieva, 1988). As economic changes trigger workplace shutdowns and reductions in the workforce, an estimated 10 million employees annually lose their jobs (U.S. Department of Labor, 1986). Findings from the Great Depression to the present, based on cross-sectional, longitudinal, and prospective designs, have documented the psychological and social costs of job loss for the unemployed person, for individual members of the person's family, and for the family as a whole (Dew, Penkower, & Bromet, 1991). Numerous studies have shown that job loss is associated with increased depressive symptoms, increased anxiety, lower self-esteem, and increased risk of suicide attempts by the unemployed person (Cobb & Kasl, 1977). Job loss also appears to affect the family of the job seeker. The husband's loss of a job is related to increased incidence of wife battering (Wind-schuttle, 1980), wife mortality (Moser, Fox, & Jones, 1984), wife psychiatric disorder (Bebbington, Hurry, Tennant, Sturt, & Wing, 1981), and child abuse (Taitz, King, Nicholson, & Kessel, 1987).

As a whole, the research literature provides consistent evidence that job loss puts the recently unemployed individual and his or her family at significant risk for emotional disorders and for deterioration of the quality of family life. As such, this research suggests that interventions delivered before or shortly after job loss hold great promise for reducing these risks and for preventing the harmful social and emotional sequelae just described. Experimental trials of preventive interventions aimed at helping the individual job seeker cope effectively with job loss have demonstrated significant financial and psychological benefits for the job seeker (Vinokur, van Ryn, Gramlich, & Price, 1991). Research also has shown that families may have an important role to

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play in coping with the sequelae of job loss and in promoting reemployment (Vinokur & Caplan, 1987). Consequently, preventive interventions aimed at the families of job seekers are logical outgrowths of initial preventive trials that involve only the individual job seeker.

This chapter is concerned with how to design and test family-focused preventive intervention programs aimed at reducing the risk of emotional disorders and family dysfunction in the period after job loss. To our knowledge, there have been no true experiments involving such family-focused interventions. We explore what will be required to develop such preventive interventions. On the basis of a literature review, we propose a programmatic strategy that joins survey and experimental methods such that the results of epidemiological studies are used to inform field experiments. We propose a process-oriented conceptual framework for guiding such research. This framework is intended to address two related questions: Why do families differ in how successfully they cope with job loss? What are the likely points of preventive intervention that are implied by such findings?

In this chapter, we also examine recent research indicating that the marital or partner relationship is particularly important in understanding the link between job loss and depression. We then discuss research on family support interventions in situations other than unemployment. On the basis of this literature, we present a set of guidelines for developing programmatic research that would identify and test fruitful family-focused preventive interventions. Finally, we present a detailed conceptual model of family processes that is serving as a specific guide for our research and for designing family-focused interventions.

What Is the Potential for Family-Focused Preventive Intervention?

To date, all experimental trials to reduce distress and depression during unemployment have targeted and studied only individual job seekers. These interventions have proved highly successful, and results of this work are described elsewhere (Caplan, Vinokur, Price, & van Ryn, 1989; Vinokur, Price, & Caplan, 1991; Vinokur, van Ryn, et al., 1991). Because these trials have not studied the effects of interventions on the family members of the job seeker, there is little information on their effectiveness in preventing negative sequelae in these family members. However, these studies have provided some initial suggestions on the importance of family factors in determining how the individual job seeker copes with job loss.

As part of the program of research on individually focused preventive interventions, Vinokur and Caplan (1987) examined the role of the wife's social support in the coping and well-being of the unemployed husband. This research suggested that partners can play a significant role in the job-seeking process through two forms of social support: motivational support and unconditional regard. With regard to motivational support, partners could either support or

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undermine the job seeker's cognitions about whether it was worthwhile to look for a job. Such cognitions were predictive of the husband's amount of job-seeking behavior 6 months later.

Unconditional regard had a much different function. When job seeking, an individual often experiences repeated setbacks. Previous research has shown that when a job seeker experiences such setbacks, the risk of depression increases, particularly for job seekers who are highly motivated to succeed (Feather & Davenport, 1981). Vinokur and Caplan's (1987) findings suggest that support in the form of unconditional regard (e.g., messages such as, "Regardless of whether you succeeded or not, we still love you") can counteract such depression-inducing effects, particularly among those who are highly motivated to look for reemployment, a group that is at higher risk for depression.

Although many family factors are likely to be important in determining successful coping with job loss, these and other findings point to the relationship with a spouse or committed partner as having a major influence on outcome. There is substantial evidence that this relationship is closely linked to the mental health of each partner. The presence of a supportive confidant, usually a spouse or partner, is one of the few factors likely to reduce the risk of psychological and emotional problems in individuals experiencing severe life stress (Barnett & Gotlib, 1988). On the negative side, Beach, Sandeen, and O'Leary (1990, p. 17) cited epidemiological data indicating that 50% of women experiencing a major depressive episode are in distressed marriages. Conversely, roughly half of all women who report marital discord are also experiencing major depression. There is also evidence for causal direction in this link. In their recent review of research on risk factors for major depression, Barnett and Gotlib (1988) concluded that marital conflict is one of the few factors that predicts the onset of depression prospectively.

These general findings are consistent with the thesis that, when job loss disrupts the marital or partner relationship, this disruption contributes to increased depression in both job seekers and their partners. These findings suggest that the relationship with a partner can have powerful effects, both negative and positive, on the capacity of both the job seeker and the job seeker's partner to weather the stresses of a period of unemployment and point to this relationship as a possible target for preventive intervention. Although we found no reports of experimental trials with such a focus, studies of couple-focused interventions in other contexts provide some insight into the feasibility and direction of such efforts.

Job seeking can introduce a particular class of problems for couples. Unlike situations in which couples must make joint decisions, such as the division of household roles, job seeking involves an asymmetry of roles in which only one person is the job seeker. Although both partners are likely to be greatly affected by the outcome of the search, the final responsibility for carrying the search to a successful conclusion falls most heavily on the partner seeking employment.

There have been a number of experimental interventions targeting such

asymmetric situations in contexts other than job loss. Some investigators have developed spouse-assisted therapies for psychiatric conditions such as depression (Rush, Shaw, & Khatami, 1980), obsessive-compulsive disorder (Emmelkamp & de Lange, 1983), and agoraphobia (Hafner, 1977), in which only one of the partners is experiencing the problem. Spouse-assisted therapy, in which the spouse is engaged as an aid in carrying out therapeutic tasks to ameliorate the symptoms of the partner, is distinguished from marital therapy, in which conflict and other issues between the partners are the targets of intervention.

Dewey and Hunsley (1990) reviewed the findings of outcome studies for spouse-assisted treatment of agoraphobia. Although this approach did not appear to differ from individual therapeutic approaches in its capacity to reduce the symptoms of agoraphobia, attrition rates during therapy were substantially lower than those reported for individual exposure-based therapy or pharmacological treatment. Furthermore, more general indicators of the quality of the marriage as measured before treatment began were significantly related to reduction in symptoms up to 1 year after treatment.

Other reports of experimental interventions into such asymmetrical relationships, particularly with regard to health behavior modification, suggest that interventions involving the assistance of a spouse often have no effect on promoting the intended behavior and may make things worse (Cohen et al., 1987). The studies that have shown beneficial effects also include those in which the spouse was generally encouraged to show no interest in the other spouse's behavior (Hoebel, 1976).

These findings suggest that simply using the spouse as an "assistant" can have unpredictable and even negative effects. There also is evidence from the agoraphobia studies that using the spouse as an assistant may be less important than attending to the quality of the marital relationship itself. Therefore, it seems wise to proceed cautiously in developing preventive interventions that include partners or spouses, attending to two general issues. First, asking partners to assist in interventions to help the job seeker may ignore the unique context of the couple's relationship. As a result, reinforcing general categories of "supportive behavior" by the partner, such as offers of aid in job-search activities, may lead to unexpected outcomes. Research on stranger interaction, for example, has indicated that providing aid can be experienced as supportive or can be perceived as a threat to self-esteem and autonomy, depending on the context and the relationship of the provider to the recipient (Fisher, Nadler, & Witcher-Alagna, 1982). Although none of these studies have included couples, it is likely that similar issues will arise in this context and will depend on how the couple has incorporated such aid provision into its regular interactions. Such offers may actually undermine the job seeker's self-esteem if the offers are perceived as implicit criticisms.

Second, these findings suggest that it may be more important to strengthen the partner relationship itself than to use the partner as an assistant in the intervention. Findings from the studies of both weight loss and agoraphobia

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point in this direction, as do the findings reviewed earlier concerning the strong correlation between increased depression and general marital conflict.

Pursuing a Research Agenda in Studying Couple Factors and Job Loss

Given the mixed findings concerning couple-focused interventions in other areas, it seems important to ask two interrelated questions: (a) What patterns of transaction among couples determine how effectively partners cope with a major negative life event such as loss of a job? (b) Once helpful and harmful patterns of such transactions are identified, what are their antecedents? These questions remain unanswered. By identifying such transaction patterns and their antecedents and by determining which are open to social influence, it should be possible to lay a conceptual and empirical foundation for the design of effective preventive interventions.

As such, we suggest that the best strategy to pursue is to develop a more elaborate picture of how couples function under stress and to test this model using survey research designs before developing couple-focused interventions. Here, we lay out this general strategy in more detail; in the following section, we describe a conceptual model of couples coping that we are currently testing as part of the second stage of this strategy.

Theory-driven programmatic research of the sort articulated by a number of prevention researchers (Caplan et al., 1989) should involve four stages when applied to family-focused interventions: (a) identification of an array of potential family factors that mediate or moderate the impact of job loss on individual adjustment; (b) integration of these factors into a process model and testing of that model through survey research designs; (c) development of preventive interventions that are based on findings from these studies, with rigorous testing of their effectiveness; and (d) engineering of successful interventions so they can be applied within real-world settings. Each of these stages is discussed relative to couple-based interventions for those experiencing job loss.

Stage 1. Identifying mediating and moderating factors. Mediating factors reflect aspects of family life that are altered or disrupted by job loss and that subsequently have an impact on individual functioning. For example, Elder, Conger, Foster, and Ardel (1992) documented how economic strain is associated with increased irritability in men and showed that such irritability can lead to increased conflict of fathers with children, which in turn is related to the emergence of childhood disorders such as aggressive behavior and depression. Here, the influence of economic deprivation on child adjustment is mediated through changes in family interaction patterns. Strong mediating factors provide a natural target for intervention, because changes in such factors will break the link between job loss and individual maladjustment. The model we develop includes a number of mediating factors, including couple transaction styles, appraisals about the job loss and the job search, and appraisals each partner has about the couple's relationship and about the other partner.

