



As we paddle our way through the worst recession in decades, it seems that getting laid off is the new national pastime. As of April more than 5 million people had already lost their jobs, according to the most recent numbers available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. And there seems to be no end in sight. With so many people looking for work and so few companies hiring, it's easy to become discouraged.

But don't lose hope. There are ways to survive a layoff and even thrive afterward. Some laid-off workers use a job loss as a catalyst to reinvent themselves. More than a few of them are changing industries; others are starting businesses or going into nonprofit work. A 60-year-old woman traded in a job at IBM with a lot of traveling for a career as a personal historian. A former Motorola project manager started her own firm to help other companies cut their cell-phone expenses. Almost everyone is reassessing priorities. And that's exactly what the jobless should be doing, career experts say.

"This is the time to reinvent yourself," says Caroline Adams Miller, author of "Creating Your Best Life List" (Sterling, 2009). "See it as an opportunity, not a crisis. This is what the most resilient people do. They make meaning out of hard times."

Easier said than done, of course. No matter how much you might have anticipated the worst, getting the actual news is a blow.

Kristin Johnson, a 31-year-old marketing executive for a Chicago steel distributor, was stunned when she was told her job was being eliminated. She had survived two layoffs and thought she was safe because her department had shrunk from about 20 to only three people. So when her boss called her in last June, "I took a notepad because I thought she was going to ask me to do something," she remembers. Instead, Johnson was told she had 60 days.

Even though she was allowed to look for a job on company time, it was a terrible period. "That was one of the hardest things I ever did in my life," she says. "People would pull me into meetings to talk about things that they would be doing after I left. It was like a knife in my heart."