

## MICHIGAN PREVENTION RESEARCH CENTER

### The JOBS Project for the Unemployed: Update



A sense of control, mastery and social support are crucial elements in sustaining mental health. That is the conclusion of many recent studies of employed groups ranging from factory workers to astronauts. A growing body of literature also links these constructs to the motivation of unemployed people from all kinds of work to engage in effective job seeking to regain employment.

What can be done to enhance social support, the sense of mastery and job search motivation among the unemployed? What effect will a preventive intervention with these goals have? And what can research on the unemployed teach us about preventive intervention overall?

These are some of the questions being asked by Michigan Prevention Research Center (MPRC) researchers as part of the JOBS Project begun in 1984. The researchers include: Amiram Vinokur, Robert Caplan, Richard Price, & Michelle van Ryn. Funded by the National Institute for Mental Health\*, the JOBS Project involves the design and evaluation of a preventive intervention aimed at providing job-seeking skills to promote reemployment and to combat feelings of anxiety, helplessness, and depression among the unemployed. The JOBS Project has completed the conduct of two successive randomized field experimental studies with over two years follow-up in each study. Both studies yielded a number of positive results (Caplan, Vinokur, Price, & van Ryn, 1989; Vinokur, Price, & Schul, 1995; Vinokur, Schul, Vuori, & Price, 2000).

• Group learning for JOBS search training. In order to make the intervention truly preventive, MPRC researchers selected participants who had been unemployed for less than four months. In groups of 15-20 persons, participants took a training program that was guided by a male-female trainer team and was delivered in 5 four-hour sessions covering a week period. The activities in the program were designed to elicit socially supportive behaviors among the participants, and enhance their sense of mastery by acquiring effective job search skills. Activities included:

- Dealing with obstacles to reemployment
- Identifying marketable skills
- Identifying sources of job leads
- Finding job leads in social networks
- Conducting the information interview
- Handling emotions related to unemployment
- Practicing and rehearsing interviews
- Thinking like an employer
- Evaluating a job offer

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The program attempted to maximize the opportunities for the participants to engage in active learning processes. These processes involved group brain storming to diagnose problems as well as to suggest active coping solutions and ways to overcome potential obstacles or barriers. Thus, throughout the program, participants were encouraged to analyze their situation for problems or potential difficulties, and to generate their own solutions. Amiram Vinokur explains, "A person who feels he or she 'owns' the solution to a problem will be more committed to implementing the solution." The group setting, he adds, is also crucial because "even if the person can't come up with a solution, he or she is exposed to people who can."

- Theory drawn preventive intervention. The JOBS Project emphasizes a theory-driven approach. "We wanted to discover some generic principles of intervention, and methods of evaluation, which could be more widely used in preventive intervention," explains Robert Caplan. Two such important principles of intervention are: the necessity of highly intensive training of the trainers before program delivery, and the importance of close monitoring of the intervention by observers during program delivery. Both of these elements help maintain a high-quality intervention.

Much of the intervention's rationale derives from research on vigilant coping that shows that people under pressure often narrow their search for solutions and tend to become prematurely invested in a certain course of action. "Vigilance promotes the search for problem-diagnosis and alternative solutions," MPRC researchers say. Participants are trained in diagnosing unemployment problems and generating alternatives for re-employment. Moreover, they receive inoculation against setbacks that protects their motivation and mental health when setbacks occur (Vinokur & Schul, 1997). As Caplan explains, "People need to anticipate setbacks and build up repertoires to cope with counter-pressures."

The JOBS intervention also derives from theory that emphasizes the importance of self-efficacy, the knowledge that one can succeed, as a motivational force for attempting difficult behaviors. The JOBS intervention was designed to provide these conditions (Choi, Price, & Vinokur, 2003; Caplan, Vinokur, & Price, 1997; Price & Vinokur, 1995) and the research findings showed that enhancement in job search self-efficacy stimulated participants to engage in intensive job search activities (van Ryn & Vinokur, 1992; Vinokur & Schul, 1997).

Finally, research and theory on social resources also drives the intervention. "Skills, social support, and knowing how to cope with setbacks are all critical social resources that can have powerful preventive impacts for people who would otherwise be very vulnerable to the adversity of life transitions like job loss," says Richard Price, Director of the Michigan Prevention Research Center. The cascade of adversities following job loss and their impact on mental health has been recently described in a paper written by Price and his colleagues published in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* (Price, Choi, & Vinokur, 2002).

### Impact of the JOBS Program

What impact has the JOBS intervention had? The Michigan Prevention Research Center's research indicates the JOBS intervention has yielded both preventive impacts on mental health and favorable cost-benefit results. Furthermore, people disadvantaged in the job market because they had less formal education or were women and those at highest psychological risk were helped most by the JOBS program.



- Lower levels of depression. Two and a half years after the completion of the randomized trial testing the JOBS intervention, people in the experimental group showed significantly lower numbers of episodes of depressive symptoms (Price, van Ryn & Vinokur, 1992).

- Higher paying jobs and cost-benefit. Furthermore, people who participated in the JOBS intervention obtained higher paying jobs and higher quality jobs which resulted in higher income and tax revenues. These cost-benefit analysis results (Vinokur, van Ryn, Gramlich & Price, 1991) indicate that the cost of the intervention was rapidly offset by increased tax revenues associated with higher quality jobs obtained by people participating in the JOBS intervention. Thus, the JOBS preventive intervention appears to have both preventive mental health impacts and to be cost effective.

- Helping unemployed women and workers with less education. Still other analyses (Vinokur, Schul & Price, 1992) indicated that women and people with less education who were at higher levels of disadvantage were benefitted more than other participants by the JOBS intervention. Thus, the JOBS intervention in its first set of trials clearly yielded mental health benefits, economic benefits and benefits for those who would be most disadvantaged by job loss.

- Helping high risk people. The JOBS intervention was most successful precisely with those people who were at highest psychological risk for episodes of depression (Price, van Ryn & Vinokur, 1992; Vinokur, Price & Schul, 1995). These were people who were at risk for experiencing higher levels of economic hardship, already displayed some depressive symptoms, and who showed lower levels of social assertiveness and higher levels of shyness.

- Skills, support and inoculation as social resources. These results make it clear that a carefully designed preventive intervention to aid persons experiencing involuntary job loss (and who are particularly at risk) can produce beneficial effects both in terms of mental health and economic outcomes. The nature of the JOBS intervention itself emphasizes not only 1) the acquisition of sense of mastery through the development of new job search skills but 2) also provides social support for participants as well as 3) inoculation against adverse setbacks associated with the stressful job search process.

- Social resources that reduce vulnerability. All of these elements of the intervention are critical in providing the motivation and support for effective job search, particularly for vulnerable populations. High quality employment and adequate pay restore mental health and reduce the acute stressors of economic hardship in the lives and families of vulnerable unemployed persons. The broader psychosocial theory supporting this intervention and these findings suggests that the JOBS intervention, especially its social support and the acquisition of sense of mastery through skill building program, are part of a set of social resources (Price, 1992) that, when provided in a systematic manner to persons at risk for adverse mental health outcomes, can serve as protective factors against the mental health risks of involuntary job loss.

- Practical impact: implementing the JOBS program in local communities. There are several practical implications of these prevention research findings. We have developed new knowledge about the actual risk factors associated with involuntary job loss, including critical information about the impact of financial hardship and certain personal predispositions that place people at psychosocial risk for mental health problems. Furthermore, an important practical implication of these findings is that a preventive intervention that is both cost effective and

reduces mental health problems could be implemented in unemployment offices throughout the United States at an approximate cost per person of \$300.

• JOBS programs can pay for themselves. Our estimates indicate that the JOBS intervention would pay for itself in terms of increased tax revenues in as little as seven months after people participating in the intervention are reemployed. Furthermore, these benefit-cost figures are conservative estimates, since they do not estimate the cost savings associated with reductions in mental health services needed for people experiencing mental health problems because of the adverse circumstances of involuntary job loss.

The Michigan Prevention Research Center has implemented the JOBS program in numerous sites including social service agencies in Michigan and Baltimore, Maryland; community service agencies in California, as well as implementation in China with a group of Chinese workers and in Finland. Toward this end, the Center has completed a comprehensive implementation manual (Curran, Wishart & Gingrich, 1999) for dissemination of the JOBS program.

For more information about the JOBS intervention and the Michigan Prevention Research Center, including a training manual for replicating the JOBS intervention and copies of research reports call or write to:

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