

## **Work and Family Life**

### **Coping with VRS**

*by Gitanjali Prasad*

Time was when you lost your job because you were incompetent or corrupt. Today, you may lose your job for no fault of your own, and with little warning. There's information on the practical aspect of change but perhaps not enough awareness of the psychological impact.

"I may be home a little late today", Kaushik Bhaumik told his wife one evening. "Fine", she replied nonchalantly, "what's on?" Kaushik's reply devastated wife, Supriya. "It's my last day at work", he told her, "so the boys may want to give me a farewell drink". Fearful that Supriya, would disapprove of his decision to take VRS, Kaushik had decided to present it to her as a fait accompli. Three years later, it's something Supriya is yet to come to terms with. The marital relationship has been affected, because Supriya feels hurt that she was not consulted on such a major decision that affected the family. But in Supriya's case, the pain and trauma have been only on the emotional level. On the practical front, things are on an even keel. Supriya earns a good salary in a public sector undertaking, and the couple has their own accommodation.

Nita Bhatia, had just seen her husband off to work, and was about to turn on the TV to relax after the hectic activity of the morning, seeing her children off to school, packing her husband's lunch, and joining him for the usual rushed breakfast, when the phone rang. It was an aunt asking to find out how they were coping. It was then Smita learnt that her high- performer husband had been given VRS a month ago. It was a perk-rich, low- salary company, so the VRS would not take the family very far. Afraid that Smita would be shattered by the news her husband was desperately looking for another job, so that he could break the news of the loss of one job with the acquisition of another. In today's recessionary times, this is not an easy task.

But the real irony is that even when the family is financially taken care of, there are tremendous adjustments to be made. In his study on Work and Fatherhood in the UK, Dr Charlie Lewis found that being breadwinner was still a paramount need of the male psyche. This is even more so for us as "izzat" or prestige is perhaps the defining characteristic of Indian culture. The official designation is often the badge of identity for an individual. When he loses that, there is a huge psychological fall out, says Sarbari Gomes, Organisation Consultant and Psychotherapist. Gomes points out that in the Indian context, the loss of status experienced by the family, affects the wife as much as the man, "often despite the fact that the wife may still be in a good job herself. "It is this business of a man being 'superior' to his wife". In addition, the fact that the man is now at home all day causes a change in the husband-wife equation, whether or not the wife has an outside job. "It is hard for children, especially teenage children to reconcile to a stay at home father, especially if the father is himself battling feelings of rejection".

One man confided that now his wife wore the pants and he wore the sari! If the husband takes the family into confidence, and the family, in turn, is supportive, life after VRS will be easier. Interest in areas not connected with the job, involvement in community service, and creative pursuits help. A pet dog is a great idea, say VRS veterans. And checking the 'what's on' column in the daily newspaper will give details of interesting programmes that are open to all, a good way to keep the mind stimulated, and provide inter-action with the outside world. It's also a great aid to networking. Experts suggest that the individual continue to work in an area that may provide employment when the economy improves. Unfortunately, this may not happen in the near future.

Corporate India is now replete with some astounding success stories of those who struck gold after VRS. However, there are also deeply disturbing stories of the reverse. Of executives who mismanage their money and are reduced to near penury. In a country with virtually no social security, "people go from being middle class to being poor," says Vidyanand Jha, Assistant Professor of Behavioural Sciences at the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta. What is ironic, is that while some companies have cut flab, others have retrenched only to re-distribute the money. Since the consulting firms and

some MNCs are now paying dollar salaries, one can only retain some highly valued employees by trying to match these salaries, and to do this, others must be asked to go. Yet other firms give VRS to older employees because they believe that these employees may not be able to cope with the challenges of the future. Jha himself believes that re-training is always preferable and makes the point that there is in fact little evidence anywhere in the world, that large scale retrenchment has actually helped a company's performance in the long term because as Robert Sutton has stated, the benefits were offset by the fear and guilt and uncertainty that those who survived the bloodletting experienced.

Many employees react to the situation by focussing on their own development rather than that of the company. In a difficult scenario, corporate India will have to show both wisdom and compassion to see that the needs of both employer and employee are suitably addressed.

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