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BRITE©: A Program to Promote Resilience Among Unemployed Families

Robyn Maitoza

University of Nevada, Reno, mrobyn@unr.edu

William P. Evans

University of Nevada, Reno, wevans@unr.edu



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BRITE[©]: A Program to Promote Resilience Among Unemployed Families

Abstract

Unemployment may be the single most powerful force challenging families in the U.S. today. The objective of the study reported here was to develop, implement, and evaluate a pilot program, BRITE[©], for unemployed individuals and their families. Results found that depression and problematic family functioning were significantly reduced from pre- to post-intervention. Follow-up with participants 6 to 9 months later also validated the efficacy of BRITE[©] and the use of a family systems approach to unemployment. Suggestions for future programming for unemployed families as well as some policy implications are discussed.

Robyn Maitoza
Internship & Employer
Relations Coordinator
mrobyn@unr.edu

William P. Evans
Professor/State
Extension Specialist
wevans@unr.edu

University of Nevada,
Reno

Introduction

The detrimental outcomes of job loss and unemployment on individuals are well-documented (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009). The effects of the unemployment experience also extend to others close to the unemployed worker, notably his or her spouse or significant other, child or children, and families (e.g., Strom, 2003). The number of families in the U.S. with at least one member unemployed was 8.4 million in 2012 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Black and Hispanic families remained more likely to have an unemployed member in 2012 (16.8% and 14.5%, respectively) than White and Asian families (9.5% and 9.2%, respectively) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012).

Unemployment statistics, though, understate the magnitude of the job crisis and the full impact of the recession on families because they do not account for the underemployed and those who have given up searching. Persons are only classified as unemployed if they do not have a job, have actively looked for work in the prior 4 weeks, and are currently available for work (Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). Moreover, during recessionary times, the unemployment rate among families increases quickly and declines more slowly than the unemployment rate in general (cf., Gray, Edwards, Hayes, & Baxter, 2009). In addition, families who live in rural areas, the areas Extension professionals often serve, experience higher levels of unemployment than families in metropolitan areas (DeBord, 1991).

Yet the effects of job loss and unemployment on families are relatively understudied, primarily because families are complex systems and the effects of unemployment are difficult to tease out from the myriad of influences on families and family member well-being (cf., Strom, 2003). Helping family members recognize and build on strengths is a first step toward recovery from the crisis. With the expectation that unemployment will remain at high levels in the near future, it is important for Extension professionals and those who serve families to establish strategies and programs that will lessen the impact associated with unemployment. A resilience-oriented perspective can serve as a broad framework for intervention and prevention services for unemployed families.

The Study

The study reported here applied the construct of resilience to family systems to learn more about ways in which unemployed individuals and their families learn to deal with and grow from this adversity. Specifically, the study involved two phases. The first phase included the development, implementation, and evaluation of a resilience-based program for unemployed individuals and their spouses/partners. The second phase consisted of follow-up interviews with some of the BRITE © program (Maitoza, 2012) participants 6 to 9 months after their participation. This phase also consisted of a focus group with additional spouses/partners of currently unemployed individuals. This was done in an effort to gather ideas as to how to increase spouse/partner participation in the future as well as to ascertain how these unemployed families coped and what advice they would like to share with other unemployed families.

Phase 1: Development, Implementation, and Evaluation of BRITE ©

BRITE © (Maitoza, 2012) was offered to clients of a local non-profit and its subsidiary, which serve unemployed individuals. After approving the curriculum, the branch managers of the non-profit and its subsidiary determined that two formats of the program should be offered to serve the diverse populations of each organization. Therefore, BRITE © (Maitoza, 2012) was delivered in seven 90-minute weekly sessions for the management-level clients and four 2-hour sessions over four consecutive days for non-management clients. (Refer to Appendix A for the topics and objectives covered in each BRITE format.)

The goal of the program facilitator was to create an informal, comfortable atmosphere in which participants felt "safe" to talk. Participants primarily engaged in small group discussion, written exercises, and other activities as part of the program. Lecture was a small portion of each session. Instead, most sessions comprised facilitated discussion among participants. The facilitator accomplished this by asking questions, validating what participants were saying, and pausing to allow participants to reflect and then speak. Conversation among the participants was quite spirited throughout each session.

Sample and Methods

There were 10 management-level clients who participated in the 7-week version of BRITE © and 15 non-management clients who attended the condensed, 4-day version. All 25 participants (100%)

were either married or living with someone in a committed relationship. Twenty percent of the management-level participants had one or two children under the age of 18 living in the household, while none of the non-management participants had children under the age of 18 living with them. There were proportionately more female attendees in the JOIN group (73%) compared to the management-level group (40%). The majority of attendees in each group were Caucasian, and the majority of attendees' households consisted of themselves and their spouse or partner. The only significant demographic difference between the two groups was the pre-unemployment annual income. Average length of unemployment was 15 months for the management-level participants and 19 months for the non-management participants. In addition, the spouses of two management-level clients attended BRITE©. Institutional Review Board certification was sought and obtained for all procedures and data collection of the study.

Pre-post surveys were used to measure change in participants' level of depression and level of problematic family functioning before and after attending BRITE©. Moreover, participants evaluated the program. In phase two of the study, 6 to 9 months after completing BRITE©, nine participants, including three spouses, agreed to be interviewed. Additionally, a focus group was conducted with eight spouses/partners of currently unemployed individuals.

Phase 1: Program Evaluation

The quantitative results showed that BRITE© participants did indeed report statistically significant reductions in depression and problematic family functioning from pre- to post-intervention. The mean decrease in depression for the management-level participants was 13.83, $t(11) = 2.24, p < .05$ (a 29.1% decrease), while the mean decrease for the non-management participants was 29.40, $t(14) = 4.23, p = .001$, a 60.2% decrease (Table 1). In addition, the mean decrease in problematic family functioning for the management-level participants was 0.25, $t(11) = 2.29, p < .05$ (a 12.8% decrease) and the mean decrease for the non-management participants was 0.63, $t(14) = 4.18, p = .001$, a 26.1% decrease (Table 2).

Table 1.

12-Item CES-D Scores of Participants from Pre-Test to Post-Test

	Management-Level Group			Non-Management Group		
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD
Pre-Test	12	47.58	24.82	15	48.87	27.77
Post-Test	12	33.75	16.77	15	19.47	6.71

Table 2.

Family Assessment Device (FAD) Scores of Participants from Pre-Test to Post-Test

	Management-Level Group	Non-Management Group
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	n	M	SD	n	M	SD
Pre-Test	12	1.95	.54	15	2.41	.75
Post-Test	12	1.70	.30	15	1.78	.34

Overall, the evaluation of the BRITE © program was positive. The majority of the participants found each workshop session "useful" or "extremely useful." All of the participants also were "satisfied" or "extremely satisfied" with the program. The most helpful aspects of the program included reframing negative thoughts into positive ones, knowing there are others who are experiencing similar feelings and thoughts, and being able to share with others. Comments about the least helpful aspects of the programs included: "I only wished more people took the class" and "Availability to layoff sooner might be more helpful." Results also revealed this program would have perhaps improved the well-being of some of the participants if it had been offered to them earlier in the job loss experience. Finally, it was helpful for participants to hear the perspectives of the spouses that attended.

Phase 2: Follow-Up Interviews

The second phase of the study involved follow-up interviews with some of the BRITE © participants as well as a focus group of spouse/partners of currently unemployed individuals. This phase of the study was important in terms of assessing the impact of the BRITE © program 6 to 9 months after participants completed it. These interviews and focus group proved to be rewarding and enlightening. (See Appendix B for interview questions.)

The participants who were interviewed clearly remembered many of the topics discussed and still had their notes from the sessions. They shared their stories of how the program helped them better cope with the unemployment experience. In fact, with a couple of participants, the program actually boosted their confidence and improved the positive outlook of the unemployed individuals, which they attributed to finding a new job shortly after completing the program. This was an indirect benefit of the program. Participants repeatedly said how valuable the BRITE © program was, especially for the spouses/partners. Making the spouses/partners happy then made the unemployed spouse/partner feel better as well and perhaps improved the relationships and functioning at home.

Clearly, the message that came through from the interviews and focus group is that it is important and valuable to have both the unemployed individual and spouse/partner attend the program together. The ideas that were generated in terms of future programming included:

- Have an informal kickoff event like a potluck or a game night to initially bring families together.
- Include children and teenagers as well as they are impacted by the unemployment.
- Offer fun classes on coupon swapping and cooking class on making great meals using less expensive items.

Discussion

Applying the theoretical construct of resilience to families from a systems perspective can add new understanding about the ways in which family systems deal with their stress (Walsh, 1998; Patterson, 2002). The study reported here applied the construct of resilience to family systems to enhance our understanding of the ways in which families learn to deal with and grow strong through the experience of unemployment.

The purpose of the study was to evaluate a resilience-based program for unemployed individuals and their families (Phase 1) and to assess the impact of this program six to nine months later (Phase 2). Results show that BRITE © was effective in significantly reducing depression and problematic family functioning of participants. Thus, future programs should build on participants' strengths or protective factors as opposed to targeting their risk factors. The group process also allows those who do start the program with little or no family protective factors in place to learn from others in the group who do. Findings also suggested that some of the unemployed individuals who participated in the program actually felt more positive and confident after participating in the program, which could have resulted in their landing a new job shortly thereafter. The quantitative results also revealed that the non-management participants reported a larger decrease in depression compared to the management-level participants, perhaps due to the condensed format.

One of the strengths of the study was that a mixed methods approach was used. This approach allowed for triangulation of the data, providing a richer understanding of the program experience and outcomes. It was promising to hear 6 to 9 months later how much of a positive impact the BRITE © program made on participants' lives. Participant as well as the focus group feedback also confirmed the value in using a family systems approach when addressing the needs of the unemployed.

The results of the study have implications for unemployment programming policy. Currently, unemployment services utilize a business perspective, not a social science perspective. Services (e.g., workshops on resume writing and interviewing, job postings) only target the unemployed individual, but results underscore the need for services focused on the family system. One of the unique contributions of the study is that family resilience-based approach used in the study can address these service gaps. Some significant changes in programming could happen with minimal cost and Extension professionals are well-positioned position to implement a program like BRITE ©.

Given the current economic climate and the fact that the unemployment rate will remain high for a while, many families remain in peril for continued unemployment and all its consequences. Although BRITE© is not designed to solve the problem of unemployment, it is set up to reduce the many harmful consequences of unemployment on families, and may even help families become stronger and more resilient in the face of ongoing challenges. In conclusion, the study reported here has demonstrated that with a few resources, a skilled facilitator, and some motivated unemployed persons and their families, the crisis of unemployment can be turned into an opportunity to bring families closer together. Extension professionals are poised to use this program to help the unemployed and communities hard hit by unemployment. For further information on the BRITE © program, contact the lead author.

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Appendix A

Topics and Objectives Covered in Each Session of the BRITE © Program

Session	Management-Level Clients, Seven Weekly Sessions	Non-Management Clients, Condensed 4-Day Version
1	<p><i>Making the Most of What You Have</i></p> <p>Objective(s): Participants will identify personal and family resources and learn how to build upon those.</p>	<p><i>Making the Most of What You Have</i></p> <p>Objective(s): Participants can identify personal and family resources and learn how to build upon those. Participants will also learn more about the nature of stress, its effects (positive and negative), as well as strategies to more effectively manage stress.</p>
2	<p><i>Turning Lemons into Lemonade</i></p> <p>Objective(s): Participants will learn what</p>	<p><i>Turning Lemons into Lemonade</i></p> <p>Objective(s): Participants will learn what</p>

	'reframing' means and will learn how to reframe their constraining beliefs or attitudes.	'reframing' means and will learn how to reframe their constraining beliefs or attitudes.
3	<p><i>How Do You Spell Relief?</i></p> <p>Objective(s): Participants will learn more about the nature of stress, its effects (positive and negative), as well as strategies to more effectively manage</p>	<p><i>Do You Know Where You're Going To?</i></p> <p>Objective(s): Participants will be able to define management in general, family management, set goals and priorities for themselves as well as their families, and manage their activities in a more proactive manner. Also passed out information on inexpensive entertainment ideas in the area.</p>
4	<p><i>Do You Know Where You're Going To?</i></p> <p>Objective(s): Participants will be able to define family management, set goals and priorities for themselves as well as their families, and manage theirs and their family's activities in a more proactive manner.</p>	<p><i>Putting It All Together</i></p> <p>Objective(s): Participants will be able to identify the components of the communication process and will learn how to better resolve conflicts with loved ones or close friends. Also, review the main topics of each session and discuss the concept of resilience.</p>
5	<p><i>How to Do More with Less</i></p> <p>Objective(s): Participants will learn more about inexpensive entertainment ideas in the local area by brainstorming with each other. The original plan for this session was to discuss financial management; however, the idea for this session was generated by participants as a replacement.</p>	
6	<p><i>Is Anybody Listening?</i></p> <p>Objective(s): Participants will be able to identify the components of the communication process and will learn how to better resolve conflicts with loved ones.</p>	
7	<p><i>Putting It All Together</i></p> <p>Objective(s): Participants will be able to define resilience and integrate the major</p>	

	concepts from the previous sessions.	
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Appendix B

Follow-Up Interview Questions for All BRITE © Participants

1. *What ideas or concepts, if any, still "stick" with you in terms of what you experienced in the BRITE © program?*

This question was asked to see if any of the tools/strategies discussed in

BRITE © have been helpful. This really speaks to the efficacy of BRITE © and

whether the program has longer-term benefits for participants. Moreover, this question is important to ask in order to determine whether BRITE © would be useful to others in the future, and if so, what topics were of most benefit to them.

2. *How has the unemployment experience affected your family, either positively and/or negatively?*

This question was asked to see how the unemployment has affected the family system as the entire family is affected by the unemployment, not just the individual who lost his/her job.

3. *Besides unemployment insurance, who or where, if at all, have you turned to for help during this time?*

This question was asked to see if the subject perceives they had enough resources to help them during this transition. This may be helpful in addressing additional service gaps for unemployed families.

4. *What advice, if any, would you like to share with other families in terms of how to better cope with unemployment?*

This question was asked as a means to share helpful information with other unemployed families, especially since the national unemployment rate expects to remain at higher-than-average levels and the number of long-term unemployed continues to rise.

5. *What ideas or thoughts do you have in terms of being able to get more unemployed individuals and their spouses/partners to participate in BRITE © in the future?*

This question was asked because participation of spouses/partners was low in the BRITE © programs. Again, this is helpful information to obtain for possible interventions for spouses/partners and other family members in the future.

6. JOIN and ProNet participants were asked what their employment status was at the time of interview. If they were reemployed, the first author asked when did they land the new job and

with whom. This was done to ascertain how many of the unemployed individuals were reemployed and how soon after attending BRITE © did this happen.

Questions for spouses/partners in focus group who did not attend BRITE.

Questions #1-5 that were asked of the BRITE © participants (above) were asked of the spouses and partners who attended the focus group in addition to the follow question:

1. *What ideas or thoughts do you have with regard to offering a program like BRITE © to both the unemployed individual and spouse/partner?*

This question was asked to first ascertain whether this group of spouses/partners saw value in offering a program like BRITE © to unemployed individuals and their spouses/partners. Moreover, I wanted to get their ideas regarding potential workshops and classes in which they would be interested in taking. This is helpful information to obtain for possible interventions for spouses/partners and/or the family in the future.

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