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Ten (and One) Things for the job search

Evidence-based positive psychology tools for anyone job searching right now — the rejections, the silence, the waiting, and everything in between.

11 tools • 14 pages • about 14 minutes to read

Free to download · No email required · No data collected

Before you start

The job market right now is genuinely hard. Not "stay positive and it'll work out" hard — structurally, measurably hard. Hundreds of applications for a single role. Long silences. Processes that ask a great deal and give very little back.

This isn't a productivity guide. It won't tell you how to write a better CV or ace an interview — there are plenty of good resources for that already. This is eleven tools, each grounded in real positive psychology research, for the parts of job searching that nobody else seems to write about: the rejection email, the silence after ghosting, the isolation, the identity questions, the weeks that are just genuinely bad.

Each one follows the same shape: the moment it's for, what the research says, something to try, and a concrete "so what" — because insight on its own isn't always enough. You're free to read this cover to cover, or just open it on the day you need one specific thing.

How to use this: Read one, or read all eleven. There's no order that matters more than another — go to whichever page matches how you're feeling today.

Accessibility: this document uses a minimum 12pt serif body text, high-contrast colour combinations tested against WCAG AA standards, structured heading levels for screen readers, and descriptive alt text on all images. If you'd find an audio version more accessible, one is available — details at moderaristudio.com.

01

The Strengths Question

For the moment you've lost the easiest answer to "who am I?"

When you lose a job, you don't just lose an income. You often lose the easiest answer to "who am I?" It's genuinely disorientating. For years the answer was simple — job title, company, a tidy sentence at a party. Now there's a gap where that used to sit.

Here's something from the research that helps: you are not your job title. You are your strengths — and those don't disappear when the job does.

TRY THIS

Write down three moments — from any part of your life, not just work — where you felt genuinely good at something. Not proud in a showy way. Just quietly capable. Now look for the pattern underneath them. Precision? Empathy under pressure? Making people feel calm?

THE RESEARCH

Seligman's research on character strengths found that people who identify and actively use their core strengths report higher wellbeing, regardless of circumstances.

SO WHAT — TODAY

Take that pattern and use it deliberately in your search this week. If it's precision, let your CV show it — tighten the wording, remove anything vague. If it's empathy under pressure, have it ready as a real story for the "tell me about a time" question. If it's making people calm, name it explicitly in a cover letter, because most people never think to.

Your strength isn't just a nice thing to know about yourself right now. It's something you can point at, use, and let do some of the work for you.

02

The Rejection Email

For the ten minutes right after “we’ve decided to move forward with another candidate.”

Most advice says be positive immediately. Find the silver lining. Don’t. That’s not what the research backs.

What the research actually shows is kinder and more useful: self-compassion beats self-esteem for processing rejection. In studies where people were asked to recall a rejection, those who responded with self-kindness — rather than trying to protect their self-esteem — reported significantly less distress. And they didn’t make excuses. They just stopped being cruel to themselves about it.

TRY THIS

Pause properly. Say, honestly: “This hurts. This particular rejection, right now, genuinely hurts, and that’s a real response to a real thing.” Not “it could be worse.” Not “others have it harder.” Just — this is hard, and it’s allowed to be hard, exactly as much as it is.

THE RESEARCH

Self-compassion research (Neff; Leary et al.) consistently finds it produces less distress and more accountability than self-esteem-protective responses.

SO WHAT — TODAY

Once that’s been sat with — and it should be allowed the time it needs — ask one specific, useful question rather than a spiral of general ones: “Is there one thing about this application I’d genuinely do differently?” Not ten things. One. If you can’t think of one, that’s useful information too — it may simply not have been about you at all.

You’re allowed the pain without needing to measure it against anyone else’s. The moving forward tends to happen faster when you don’t skip that part.

03

The Wins You're Skipping

If job hunting has taken its toll and even the traditionally positive moments — like a first interview — now feel flat, numb, or oddly negative, this one's for that.

“Got an interview” isn’t a small thing. It just feels small when you’re in survival mode, because your brain is scanning for the next threat, not sitting with the win. And after enough rounds of this, some people stop feeling the win at all. That’s not you failing to be positive. That’s what prolonged searching genuinely does to the nervous system.

TRY THIS

When something small goes right, stop for thirty seconds. Actually notice it happened, even if you don’t feel much yet. Say it out loud if you can. The noticing doesn’t require the feeling to show up first.

THE RESEARCH

This skill is called savouring (Bryant & Veroff) — deliberately pausing to notice and extend a positive moment. Research shows it’s one of the more reliable ways to build wellbeing, because most of us are naturally much better at dwelling on the bad than lingering on the good.

SO WHAT — TODAY

Keep a running note — just a notes app, nothing fancy — titled “Evidence.” Every reply, every kind recruiter, every interview, every cover letter you were proud of, goes in it. Not for your CV. For the days the search feels like it’s producing nothing at all, when you need proof that it actually is.

It won't fix the market. It will stop you from feeling like nothing is happening, when quietly, something usually is.

04

The Silence

For the applications that just... go quiet.

Ghosting isn't rejection. It's worse — it's the absence of an ending. 86% of people who've been ghosted after a job application say it left them feeling down or depressed.¹ A rejection, however painful, gives your brain something to close. Silence gives it nothing — so it fills the gap itself, usually with the worst possible story.

There's a real name for this: ambiguous loss. Researcher Pauline Boss found this kind of unresolved loss is often harder to process than a clean, painful ending, because there's no societal ritual for it. There's also the Zeigarnik effect — unfinished tasks create genuine discomfort until something marks them as done.

TRY THIS

Name the story you're telling yourself, out loud or on paper. "They hated me." "I'm not good enough." Now ask — is that the most likely explanation, or just the loudest one? The truth is almost always more boring: a hiring freeze, an internal candidate, a recruiter juggling 280 applications for one role — roughly the average right now.²

THE RESEARCH

Ambiguous loss theory (Pauline Boss) and the Zeigarnik effect both explain why an open loop, even a small one, sits so heavily.

SO WHAT — TODAY

Most applications now go through a portal with no direct contact, so a follow-up isn't always possible. If it is, one polite message after two weeks is fine, then leave it. Either way, build your own small closing ritual: move the application, physically, from an "applied" list to a "closed" one. Say, out loud or in writing, "this one's finished, whatever the reason." You get to choose the ending, since nobody else is going to give you one.

Research on closure specifically shows self-created rituals restore a sense of agency exactly where an external ending has been denied.

05

The Isolation

For office workers missing the lift small talk, and home workers missing the Slack thread — the same mechanism, two different shapes.

If you're an office worker, it's not just the job you're missing right now. It's the lift small talk. The person who always said good morning. Losing that job removed dozens of these at once.

If you're a home worker, your version of this was probably digital and task-focused — a Slack thread, a stand-up call. Genuine connectivity, but a narrow kind, and when the job goes so does the entire category, all at once.

TRY THIS

Sandstrom and Dunn found that “weak ties” — low-effort interactions with people outside your close circle — make up 60% of most people's daily social contact, and predict wellbeing independently of how strong your close relationships are. The effect is strongest for introverts.

THE RESEARCH

Weak-tie research (Sandstrom & Dunn) plus a tested micro-intervention (West et al., 2024) using if-then planning to improve interaction quality within two days.

SO WHAT — TODAY

Make a specific if-then plan, and it costs nothing: “If I'm walking the dog, then I'll properly say good morning to whoever I pass.” “If I'm at the library, then I'll thank the person on the desk and mean it.” A real place you're already going, a real small moment. Dr David Hamilton's kindness research (building on Allan Luks' “helper's high” work) also found small acts of warmth release oxytocin and dopamine in the person being kind — not just the person receiving it.

Being warm toward someone else is, quietly, doing something for you too.

06

The “Anything Will Do” Trap

For when survival makes every application feel interchangeable.

When you need work urgently, applying for absolutely everything feels like the safest strategy. It's usually not. Completely understandable — when survival is the priority, “anything” feels safer than “the right thing.” But scattergun applying to roles with no connection to what you actually value tends to produce worse outcomes. Interviewers can feel the absence of genuine interest, even when they can't quite name why.

TRY THIS

Spend fifteen minutes identifying two or three things that genuinely matter to you in how you want to work. Not the dream job. Real values. Being trusted with autonomy. Honest communication. Doing something that doesn't feel pointless by Wednesday.

THE RESEARCH

Values-alignment research consistently shows genuine motivation comes through in application quality, even under time pressure.

SO WHAT — TODAY

Pick one line of your CV's personal statement or one paragraph of your cover letter template, and rewrite it around those values specifically — once, properly, then reuse it. Not a full rewrite for every application. One genuinely values-aligned paragraph, saved, ready to drop in.

This isn't about being precious when you need income. It's often the difference between an application that blends into 280 others and one that doesn't.

07

The Missing Structure

| *For the days that have lost their shape.*

One of the hardest parts of losing a job can be the sudden absence of a shape to your day. The alarm that used to mean something. The natural start and end points. The small, forgettable sense of competence that comes from doing tasks and finishing them.

TRY THIS

Build a simple three-part day. One block for job search admin, with a hard stop, not an open-ended scroll. One task, unrelated to the search, that you can finish and point to. And one thing, however small, that brings you genuine joy. Not content. Not “self-care” in the vague sense. Joy, specifically.

THE RESEARCH

Humans have a basic psychological need for competence and mastery, entirely separate from income (self-determination theory).

SO WHAT — TODAY

Write the three down each morning. Tick them off — not because ticking boxes is magic, but because “I finished what I set out to do today” is a genuinely stabilising sentence to be able to say.

It won't replace the job. But it rebuilds a steady sense that you're still capable of finishing things, and still capable of joy, even in the middle of something hard.

08

The Shrinking World

For anyone job searching — and honestly, useful too if you're in work and your days have started to feel flat.

Laptop, inbox, refresh, repeat. A day that starts and ends in the same chair, in the same room, looking at the same screen. It happens gradually and quietly — you don't notice your world shrinking while it's shrinking. A shrinking world tends to produce shrinking thoughts — more rumination, less perspective.

TRY THIS

A proper look at the sky. A walk somewhere with a view. Something in nature you'd normally scroll past.

THE RESEARCH

Research on “awe” (broaden-and-build theory, Fredrickson) shows even small doses of encountering something larger than your immediate concerns has a measurable effect on stress and mood.

SO WHAT — TODAY

Build it into the day itself, not as a separate reward. If you're job searching, take a short walk before the one phone call or video interview you have this week, rather than going straight from waking up to opening a laptop. If you're in work, do the same before a meeting, or on your lunch break instead of at your desk. Ten minutes, outside, before anything screen-based.

Not a treat for later. Part of the process.

09

The Letter

For the weeks that are properly bad, not just a setback.

Maybe it's been three rejections in three days. Maybe it's the silence that's worse than any of them. Maybe it's just the cumulative weight of doing this for longer than you ever thought you'd have to.

TRY THIS

Write yourself a letter, as if from someone who loves you unconditionally and understands exactly what you're going through right now — the actual, specific version, not a generic hard time. Not a pep talk. Someone who can see the situation clearly, acknowledge how hard the search genuinely is, and remind you of who you are underneath what's currently happening in your inbox.

THE RESEARCH

Studies using this exact self-compassion letter-writing exercise (Neff) found it measurably reduced self-criticism and increased resilience.

SO WHAT — TODAY

A letter you write and forget doesn't do much. Keep it somewhere you'll actually see it again — a photo as your phone lock screen for a week, folded in your wallet, stuck to the laptop you use for applications. Reread it specifically on the next hard day of the search.

It'll still be true on that day. That's the point of writing it now, while you can see it clearly.

10

Beyond the Title

For the question that's harder than it should be right now.

If someone asked you today “who are you, without the job?” — what would you actually say? For a lot of people, that’s genuinely hard right now, and that’s not a personal failing. Work is one of the primary ways modern life teaches us to answer “who am I” — so when it’s absent, the question feels enormous.

TRY THIS

Finish the sentence “I matter because...” five different ways, without using your job or income once. What’s left when you take those away?

THE RESEARCH

Meaning — one of the five core pillars of wellbeing in positive psychology (Seligman’s PERMA framework) — comes from connection, contribution and values, not job title alone.

SO WHAT — TODAY

Take whichever answer felt most true, and let it show up somewhere in how you present yourself in this search. Not as therapy-speak in a cover letter. As tone. As the calm, grounded version of you that interviews from “I know who I am” rather than “please pick me.” Employers notice the difference, even when they can’t name it either.

This was the last of the ten. There’s one more — a bonus — overleaf.

11

The Comparison Trap

| *A bonus, on something that runs underneath all ten of the others.*

“Someone else has it worse” is not comfort. It’s a trapdoor. It sounds like perspective. It usually isn’t. What it actually does, most of the time, is quietly tell you that your own pain isn’t allowed — that you need to earn the right to feel bad by proving nobody has it worse than you, which is a competition you can never actually win.

And here’s where it leads: shame. Not sadness, which is a response to loss. Shame — the sense that you are the problem, that you shouldn’t be feeling what you’re feeling. Shame is one of the most corrosive emotions there is, and comparison is one of its most reliable delivery systems.

TRY THIS

To be clear — perspective matters. Not getting a job is not the same as receiving a terminal diagnosis. That’s true. But perspective and comparison are not the same thing. Perspective says: this is real, and there are also worse things, and both facts can be true at once. Comparison says: because worse things exist, you’re not allowed this one.

THE RESEARCH

Shame research consistently identifies comparison as a primary trigger, distinct from and more corrosive than ordinary sadness or disappointment.

SO WHAT — TODAY

Next time you catch yourself thinking “I shouldn’t feel this bad, other people have it worse” — stop and rewrite it. “This is hard for me, and that’s allowed, and other people’s hard things don’t cancel mine out.” Say it exactly like that if you need to.

Your pain is your own. It doesn’t need to be ranked against anyone else’s to be legitimate.

That's all eleven.

If even one of these helped on one hard day, it's done what it was written to do.

If you'd like to talk — about any of this, about where you are in your search, or just to be heard by someone who isn't assessing your CV — my messages are always open. No charge, no catch.

You can find more free resources, and everything else I build, at moderaristudio.com.



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Sources referenced in this guide:

1. Tribepad ghosting survey, 2025.
2. Average job applications per hire, UK labour market data, 2025–2026.

Character strengths: Seligman, M. Self-compassion: Neff, K.; Leary, M. et al. Savouring: Bryant, F. & Veroff, J. Ambiguous loss: Boss, P. Zeigarnik effect: Zeigarnik, B. Weak ties: Sandstrom, G. & Dunn, E.; West, T. et al. (2024). Kindness/helper's high: Hamilton, D.; Luks, A. Awe/broaden-and-build: Fredrickson, B. PERMA: Seligman, M.

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