When the crisis is personal: the emotional and physical effects of economic strain

Bailouts, debt overload, layoffs, dwindling retirement funds…. If each new economic report ties your neck up in knots or leaves you reaching for the antacid, you're not alone. As if modern life weren't stressful enough, recent stock market fiascos, job losses and credit shortfalls are adding even more angst to daily life.



The result is a growing concern amongst many mental health professionals that the added external tension of the current economic climate will further erode our physical and emotional health. This is especially true of those who are predisposed to anxiety, since for many, uncertainty (which is a key element of our current economic climate), is also typically a major source of internal stress.

The increased stress of the downturn can cause:

Anxious or obsessive behaviour. Uncertainty around your retirement investments, job security or how you're going to pay mounting debt can leave you feeling uneasy, even jittery. The added pressure propels many people to look for ways to gain control, sometimes obsessively.

More sleepless nights. Since stress is linked to insomnia, it's not surprising to find that almost one third of the population is losing sleep over personal finances, job security, and the general economic malaise. And all that tossing and turning can have some serious health repercussions: insomnia is linked to weight gain, depression and, research suggests, can make you up to five times more likely to suffer from high blood pressure.

Depression. Living with the constant, low-grade tension of the current economic climate can, over time, gnaw away at your optimism, confidence and impact the way you perceive your situation. A recent study revealed that stress can actually interfere with the brain's ability to deal with a stress response: essentially making the brain speed up when in normal circumstances it would slow down. If not addressed effectively, this negative current can drag you emotionally down into a depressed state where solutions seem far off and feelings of sadness and disconnectedness prevail.

Bad eating habits to blossom. Your daily habits are more likely to change during tense times where making healthy food choices becomes less of a priority and can also seem more expensive. People having trouble sleeping at night may also over-indulge in caffeine during the day to stay awake. The problem? Excess caffeine can create a vicious cycle; leaving you jittery and agitated during the day and unable to sleep at night.

Illness. The inability to cope with the changes and fears in the workplace can create anxiety and unnecessary stress that may lead to increased sick days. The stress of the economic storm brewing may also be literally making your head hurt: a recent online poll showed significant increases in headaches over a similar poll taken in 2004.

Heart problems. At greatest risk, according to many health professionals, is the heart. Cardiologists suggest that since stress, anxiety and depression all adversely affect heart health, the emotional roller coaster ride of economic instability could have a significant impact on your ticker: from a higher heart rate, to elevated blood pressure to hardening of the arteries.

An increase in suicide calls. As people are hit with the emotional stress of job loss and/or looming bankruptcy, the distress can ultimately lead to thoughts of killing themselves as a way out. One Toronto crisis centre noted a 30 per cent jump in calls since the start of the recession while anecdotal evidence suggests a 25 per cent increase in suicides in the hardest-hit manufacturing regions of the country.

A spike in addictions. as people turn to their vices as a way to "escape" the doom and gloom of a bad economic environment. In fact, a recent study suggested that nearly one tenth of Canadians are medicating

with alcohol before bed to combat insomnia. Whether drugs, alcohol or gambling, self-destructive addictive behaviour can severely impact the life and future of the sufferer and cause great pain to loved ones witnessing the addiction firsthand. Unfortunately, the more unravelled the person becomes the greater the feeling of hopelessness, and the more likely the downward spiral is to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

While it's hard to escape the dark cloud hovering above entirely, having a solid understanding of the toll the recession can take on you is an important first step in preventing the economic meltdown from becoming a physical and emotional one too.