Unhealthy escapes: the rise of addictions and suicide during a downturn

With a constant stream of bad economic news from almost every corner, it can be hard not to feel as low as the bearish stock market. Whether you or your loved one is facing a pay cut, layoffs, or trying to deal with s going south, it can be difficult not to think—and feel—the worst.



Living in tough economic times not only increases the risk of substance abuse and suicide, but of other dysfunctions as well, including family violence and childhood neglect. Studies indicate that financial stressors are among the greatest risk factors for emotional disturbance and health issues like insomnia and high blood pressure.

But by learning a bit more about some of the signs of stress, and knowing there are ways to deal with them early on, it is possible to weather the economic storm with your self-esteem and emotional health intact.

Dead-end escapes

During hard economic times, when prospects seem few, people who were already struggling to make ends meet may be pushed to the brink. People who had been keeping body and soul together find that the reality—or even the fear—of watching their income evaporate or their savings dwindle while bills are mounting can cause previously unrecognized addictions and/or mental health issues to surface.

Many newly unemployed or underemployed people and those who've lost their life's investments in the markets are usually, at first, able to carry on, both financially and emotionally. But as weeks and months wear on, and the recession only seems to deepen, what at first looked like a bit of bad news can turn into a financial and emotional catastrophe.

While turning to the bottle, the casino or the fridge may seem like a great escape from what ails you, the reality is that the more you try to escape, the more there will be to escape from.

Reaching out

The extreme stress of something as unsettling as a recession leaves many feeling like they have little or no control over their life. Faced with new and trying circumstances, people often first try to carry their problems alone.

Crisis call centres across Canada and the U.S. are not only experiencing a marked overall increase in calls, but they're receiving more calls than ever from people who have never called a crisis line before.

While the increase in the number of calls to distress centres is a gloomy statistic, there is also a bright side—people are doing just what they need to do and are reaching out for help when they can no longer cope alone.

Fear, judgement, showing weakness: these are three of the main reasons people avoid getting outside help when they clearly need it. While it may be difficult, ignoring the fact that you're no longer able to manage the emotional challenges you're facing won't make them go away. Instead of shutting others out and shutting down, embrace support and hope. By taking advantage of all the resources available to you, you'll put yourself on the path to a life that is better, stronger and healthier.

Underlying causes

In Canada, it's estimated that one person in five will experience a mental disorder at any one time.

In recent generations, many people have moved to big cities to find work, leaving behind regular contact with family and support networks. Alcohol is in ready supply. Addictions are fuelled by a culture of instant

gratification. And the mental health support system can’t keep up with the demand. For some, the downward spiral of depression culminates in the dire belief that the only choice available is to end it all.

Depression is an illness, and there are options for treatment—many of which are free. If you or someone you love is experiencing any of the following, seek out support:

- Feeling hopeless or worthless
- Sudden crying spells
- Trouble sleeping
- Difficulty focusing
- Irritability
- Loss of interest in everyday activities

Remember, if at any time, you are worried that you or a loved one is in immediate danger of self-harm or hurting others, you should call 911 right away.

Awareness and early intervention are an important step in avoiding family and personal tragedy. The most important thing is to ask for help. Many communities offer free, confidential distress lines and counselling services.

Addiction and suicide happen in silence. Don’t let these financial times separate you from those who care. Keep healthy and connected and you will find more options for relieving the stress of a poor economy.