

COPING WITH THE STRESS OF SHARP ECONOMIC RECESSIONS

We have been hearing it in the news, and experiencing it in our pocket books: the consequences of the latest economic downturn. After seeing the economy roaring along, with escalating home values and souring retail sales, it can be quite a jolt when the gas prices shoot up, foreclosure notices increase and the stock market takes a sharp slide. As our investment values decrease, and/or business declines, many Americans worry about the future of the economy (American Psychological Association's 2007 Stress in America survey).

According to the American Psychological Association (APA) stress is on the rise and has become a major health problem. APA's recent poll shows approximately one-third of Americans are living with extreme stress and that their stress level has increased in the past 5 years. Nearly half report stress has consequences on all aspects of their lives. About a third have difficulty managing work and family, while half report increased relationship conflict and squabbles due to stress (apahelpcenter.org).

Good and Bad Stress

Although a certain amount of stress can be helpful, such as when we feel the pressure to finish a task as the due date comes near, severe stress can take an emotional and physical toll. Positive stress, such as getting married, buying the first home, beginning college or joining the military can be exciting. Positive stress (also known as "eustress") can be stimulating and trigger good feelings and creativity. However, too much stress (even too much positive stress, such as "burning both ends of the candle") can be harmful. Working long hours for many weeks or months can be considered a "good problem" if it means your business is booming, but eventually you can become burned out. Long work hours without balancing your life with family, fun, and relaxation can dull problem solving abilities and creativity.

Stress can cause health problems due to a variety of physical and behavioral processes. When people are overwhelmed with high levels of demands they commonly experience emotional, as well as physical reactions. Anxiety is an emotion (an internal response to stress) that has both thinking and physical components. Thinking might become repetitive and worrisome contributing to sleep disturbances and increased tension. Tension, then, contributes to numerous physical symptoms. Physical responses might include stomachaches, muscle tension (headaches, back and neck pain), heart palpitations and fatigue. All these symptoms can affect behavior, such as poor concentration, forgetfulness and irritability.

Coping with Stress

APA's survey found three-quarters of the respondents reported feeling physical symptoms of stress in the past month, with half feeling fatigue while almost half experiencing insomnia and headaches. Although almost a third of the respondents report they are managing their stress extremely well, those who have unhealthy habits tend to

increase their poor behaviors. Unhealthy responses to stress include smoking, drinking, overeating (or skipping meals), gambling and debting (ie, buying sprees) to name a few. Many in the survey reported spending too much time watching TV, playing video games, or using the internet.

The good news is that APA's survey found people used numerous healthy coping skills, as well. Half reported listening to music, reading, or exercising (including walking. Forty percent spend time with family and friends while 34 percent prayed. These techniques have been found to actually increase our "feel good" brain chemistry in ways that do not have negative consequences and can last much longer than unhealthy coping styles.

Coping Tools

Explore your thoughts (cognitions):

Validate your concern, but turn it into a problem to solve. How have you coped with difficult problems in the past? What resources did you use?

Check your thoughts during periods of worry or upset. Are you catastrophizing (thinking the worst) or scapegoating (thinking the problem is "out there" and that everything is out of your control)? Extreme thinking can trigger severe emotional and physical reactions in your feelings and bodily sensations.

Know you are not alone. The economic downturn is a reflection of similar problems happening to many people, not only in America, but around the world. Talk nicely to yourself. Remember, much of the situation has been referred to as a "bipartisan problem." Even Greenspan admitted he didn't see it coming (although I was wondering who were all the people buying so many huge, new houses?).

Check your emotions and feelings:

Avoid a panic reaction. Panic can lead to impulsivity or passivity. Acting too quickly or withdrawing and doing nothing can lead to erroneous solutions. The economy waxes and wanes like the ocean waves or the weather. Can you learn from this experience and develop a plan to be less vulnerable the next time?

Explore your behavior:

Breathe! Fill your lungs with oxygen (slowly in through your nose), hold briefly, then slowly blow through your mouth. A few deep breaths will allow your lungs to stretch and is a great relaxer, is free and can be done anytime, anywhere.

How “balanced” are your activities of daily living? Are your work hours reasonable. Have you balanced work and time with family and friends, exercise, fun and relaxation? How much time is spent in unhealthy behaviors?

Get support. For those who have not been through a recession before, talk with those who have. How did they cope? What financial techniques did they use?

Get professional help, if you are in a financial bind (make an appointment for a consultation with a local consumer credit group, an accountant, a financial planner, or an attorney).

Consider an action plan, with alternatives.

Make plans in small steps (even making that phone call for a consultation appointment is a good step).

Make self-care a priority. Focus on small steps that can be developed and utilized on a daily basis to be good to yourself. Eat healthy meals, go for a walk with your family, friend or dog. Read a good book. At the end of the day you will feel good about what you have accomplished toward developing or maintaining a healthy life style for yourself and your family.

Once you are feeling better, consider involvement in the community in some way. Shift the worry about “where our nation going” into action. Become part of the solution. Community involvement can include the arts, a community service club, an environmental or political group, church, a charity or local soup kitchen. Involvement with others who are active stimulates hope and faith that there are many good things going on, too!

For more information on the APA Stress Survey, go to apa.org or apahelpcenter.org. These tips are not a substitute for psychological help. If you believe you could benefit from, or need care, please do not hesitate to consult a psychologist.