

# be well

A special information series on wellness at home and in the workplace, sponsored by



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## money and stress

Looking for evidence of the effect of financial issues on mental health? We don't have to search far, says Taylor Alexander, CEO of the Canadian Mental Health Association.

"The serious impact that the financial stresses in the U.S. economy are having on their population demonstrates how deeply finances affect well-being. The U.S. is experiencing increases in domestic violence, concerns about suicide, depression, and a variety of stress-related issues, such as substance abuse. There is no rea-

son to believe that Canada will be affected differently as our economy worsens."

"Global economic conditions tend to contribute to overall financial stress," says Michele Nowski, director of disability claims and disability management, Desjardins Financial Security. "In the 2008 Desjardins Financial Health Survey, although 45 per cent of Canadians reported that money was a major source of stress in their life, most respondents said they felt their financial security was good, very good or excellent. Given what has happened

over the past few weeks, you can imagine that those same Canadians are probably not feeling so good about things right now."

Watching retirement savings accounts decline in value is a source of considerable stress, and that stress often translates into work-related stresses as well. "For older baby boomers, in particular, there may be a greater unwillingness to take risks, less ability to cope with change. They may also be working with colleagues who are showing increased signs of stress. We

know from the survey that people were already driving themselves too hard; coming into work sick and exhausted. The impact of financial stress on mental well-being ebbs and flows, but this particular economic crisis is one that touched every single individual," says Ms. Nowski.

Unmanageable stress and unmanaged worry can have long-lasting effects on mental and physical health, quality of life and productivity in the workplace, so it is in the best interests of both individuals and organizations to take a

proactive approach to managing financial stressors.

"People first need to be aware of how their finances are affecting them at a personal level," says Dr. Alexander. "Recognizing the impact of their finances on their mental and physical health can help guard against depression, as well as stress reactions, such as abusing alcohol or medications or having conflict with spouses, partners or co-workers." (The warning signs of depression are described on CMHA's website at cmha.ca.)

When signs of depression or stress become apparent, he says, it's important to take action. "I encourage people to get help, to reach out for appropriate support. Counselling and/or medication may be needed. But simply talking to a spouse, partner or friends about how these stresses are affecting you can be very helpful, as a first step."

What isn't helpful, he says, is hiding from the problem. "Stay informed about your finances, so that you can make informed decisions. In times like this, hard decisions may have to be made about your budget and lifestyle. There are

excellent professional services available to support people in dealing with debt burdens that have become overwhelming. If there has been a job loss, employment support programs and retraining are available. The main thing is to take control of your personal life and reach out for support."

It may sound cliché, says Ms. Nowski, but good nutrition, sleep and exercise are often neglected when someone starts experiencing a significant amount of stress, and are three of the most important keys to wellness in times of trouble. "You're not going to make the situation go away, but sleep, nutrition and exercise will leave you feeling much better overall, and dramatically increase your ability to manage stress."

In the workplace, employee assistance programs usually offer resources for financial stresses as well as depression, family and social issues, she says. "Employers who don't currently offer these resources may want to think about introducing them, given the situation and the amount of stress that money issues are causing Canadians today."

## Online tools help Canadians take stock of their financial security

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Insight

## Expert says we can't afford not to be happy

Q&A  
Dr. Kenford Nedd

Q: What are the major causes of stress right now in Canada, and what is the impact in the workplace and our economy?

A: Over 50 per cent of people will say the major cause of stress in Canada right now is financial pressure. People in more senior positions, such as executives, tend to experience greater consequences as a result. The speed and pressures of work cause stress in the workplace.

Companies that recognize employees perform better when they can integrate downtime and work time – like having a room to relax or time to



chat with friends – do better than companies where there is a culture of overwork and pressure.

The financial cost of stress on Canadian industry is about \$51 billion annually – more

than the profits of all Fortune 500 companies put together. If you really look after stress, you're looking after your business.

Q: What is the impact of stress on individuals?

A: We used to think the consequences of stress on organizations were financial, and the cost of stress on the individual was anxiety, depression and other mental disorders. We now know that stress causes a release of hormones, such as cortisol and adrenaline, on employees at work. These hormones can precipitate heart attack, so by fighting stress, you're also fighting heart disease.

When you're under stress,

you get secretion of cortisol, and cortisol causes an accumulation of visceral fat around the upper part of the abdomen. This fat has enzymes in it, and under further stress, the cortisol mixes with the enzyme to cause insulin release. That causes more fat to be layered on the body as well as a rise in blood sugar. Many patients find their diabetes is worsened or precipitated for the first time during periods of high stress.

Stress is something that affects our immune systems, and the incidence of diabetes is increasing, along with high blood pressure, heart disease and cancer. I am not saying that stress causes cancer – but ongoing stress weakens the

immune system. In Japan, 34,000 otherwise healthy Japanese men die every year of stress-related heart attacks.

In North America right now, we have to be very careful that we don't compromise the strength and energy of our employees by refusing to deal with stress in the workplace.

Q: What are some of the primary strategies for managing stress better?

A: Nutrition is crucial. Right now I am a little bit afraid for people who are so busy and worried in this economic climate that they rush out to work without breakfast. This stimulates the release of cortisol and insulin causing inflammation that can lead to serious

diseases.

In my books, I talk about happiness as the antidote to stress. We can't afford not to be happy. We can't permit these stress hormones to surge unchecked. Happiness in the workplace triggers the release of chemicals that strengthen the immune system, and the good news is that you can be happy in bad times. Happiness is learning to live with skill. I advise everyone to make a decision today, that whatever happens you're going to smile, take the optimistic view, work it out, and carry your happiness with you.

Dr. Kenford Nedd is a practising medical doctor in behavioural medicine and stress management.

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