

Is Your Stress Going Up as the Economy Is Going Down?

By Kendal Bradley

Are you stressed out and having a hard time coping? Your ability to cope is influenced by your perception of what is going on. One of the most effective ways to reduce stress while you are under increased demands is to increase your sense of control over the situation. Year after year, Canadian employees report that they are facing greater and greater demands.¹ Planning and controlling the controllable factors in your situation can not only lower your stress but also improve your situation, which ultimately will lower your stress level further.

If you feel stressed you are not alone. Millions of people around the world are being affected by the economic downturn. Don't dwell on the stresses in your life; instead, talk to your trusted friends, family and relevant professionals about what is happening and see what advice they have for you. Talking to others about what is going on in your life can help you gain perspective, get new ideas and feel supported.



Figure 1 from Desjardin Financial Security's "Health is Cool! 2008 Survey on Canadian Attitudes Towards Physical and Mental Health."

There is no health without mental health, so look after your mind. In 2008 Desjardin Financial Security's national "Health is Cool!" survey found that money, health, work and family problems were the four top sources of stress reported by most Canadians. The economic downturn has increased the intensity of these stresses on many. Here are some tips and tools for facing each source of stress head-on.

Finances and Money Problems

Money problems can be stressful, especially if your financial status is unclear. Trying to decide what to do with your assets or how to manage your debts can be confusing and nerve-wracking. Talk to a financial planner at your bank about your current position and ask them to help you

¹ Desjardin Financial Security. 2008. "Health is Cool!" survey <http://www.dsf-dfs.com/NR/rdonlyres/1E47B95B-85E0-4A52-93E6-474A2E56D287/0/GatefoldBusinessPeopleHealthisCool.pdf>

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create a plan; learning how to manage debt can be a big stress relief. Since financial problems are Canadians' greatest source of stress, Dr. Ungar, Chief of Psychiatry and Medical Director of the Mental Health Program at North York General Hospital, suggests that seeing a financial planner or a debt organizer can be an important way for Canadians to help maintain their mental health.

If you are financially strained or experiencing job insecurity, you may be trying to increase your savings. This can be a good idea; however, it is important to think carefully about *how* you will save. Do not try to save money by cancelling or delaying medical and therapy appointments or by stopping taking medications. As with any health issue, consult with a medical professional about your concerns before taking action. Skipping dosages and splitting pills can worsen your health and hinder your work performance.

Try to be honest with your family and yourself about your financial situation. Secrets are often stressful; transparency can help prevent avoidable arguments. Although it is difficult, try not to place *blame* for financial problems: blame is not constructive and can only cause harm and additional stress.

Staying Healthy and Coping with Health Problems

Now, as always, it is important to look after yourself and the people you care about. Eating a balanced diet, being physically active and reaching out for social support are important. Often, as you become busier and stress levels rise, healthy behaviours fall by the wayside. But, healthy behaviours can make you feel better in the short term and can boost your resiliency to help you get through tough times. Staying physically healthy can help prevent burn-out and other mental health problems from developing.

“Get help when people notice that you aren’t yourself, when you constantly think that you can’t cope or when you can’t do the things you used to do.” — Donna Hardaker, Mental Health Works

While moving through the economic downturn it is important you remember to keep an eye on your own mental and physical health. **The earlier you catch any mental health problems, the earlier you can deal with them and start the healing and recovery process.** Karen Liberman, Executive Director of the Mood Disorder Association of Ontario, says “It’s okay to feel bad when bad things happen; but if it continues and you’re depressed about everything, that’s a sign that something is wrong.” The Moods Disorder Association offers a private and confidential on-line screening tool for moods disorders (to try this tool, visit www.checkupfromtheneckup.ca). If you think something could be wrong, visit a medical professional and tell them about what is going on.

Work Pressures

Currently, with the marketplace changing so quickly, it can be expected that employees will experience unusually high levels of stress. In 2008 before the economic downturn, 85 percent of employees agreed that they work in a very stressful environment.² High levels of stress can

² Desjardin Financial Security. 2008. “Health is Cool!” survey <http://www.dsf-dfs.com/NR/rdonlyres/1E47B95B-85E0-4A52-93E6-474A2E56D287/0/GatefoldBusinessPeopleHealthisCool.pdf>

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cause temporary dips in productivity. Talk to your manager if you recognize that you are stressed and that your productivity is suffering; let them know what is going on and ask them for support.

For most people, job insecurity is a major source of stress. Unfortunately, many managers and employers are unsure of how the economy will affect their company, so they may be unable to offer honest reassurance. To reduce your own stress about the possibility of being laid off, one of the best things you can do is to prepare yourself for it: update your resume, do a skills inventory for yourself and look at other employment opportunities. Being laid off can feel like an emotional roller coaster; one way to diminish or avoid these feelings is to have a plan ready for how you will find a new job. Taylor Alexander, CEO of the Canadian Mental Health Association, advises the newly unemployed that “You may be shocked, angry, or deny that anything bad has happened to you. You will probably worry or feel anxious about how you are going to pay the bills. This can also make you feel frustrated and depressed.” Visit www.cmha.ca for additional information on how to cope with unemployment and job stress.

At least 74 percent of employees report that they are overworked and 89 percent think, as the years go by, that more and more employees are suffering from burn-out, major depression, anxiety or other mental health problems.³ A recent study found that a significantly higher prevalence of anxiety and depression in employees who work more than 49 hours per week.⁴ Although there will be periods when you may have to work more than your normal hours, especially as your company tries to adjust for layoffs, this should not be a constant expectation or part of your life. So if it seems as though you are constantly burning the midnight oil, speak up and talk with your manager.

Being constantly connected through electronics to the office on your personal time can cause you to be less focused and productive while you are at work. One way to do better at work is to take a break when you go home. Liberate yourself: Leave your BlackBerry in another room when you relax at home or when you go out. Pick specific times to check your email and phone messages and take the rest of your time off. In the end, your health is the most important thing — and by constantly remaining in a state of chronic high stress, you are jeopardizing it.

Family Problems

Achieving a work/life balance is difficult. It takes finding and maintaining a healthy and manageable level of stress in our work and home life. In the face of economic crisis, tension at work and at home can rise. Home stress and job stress cause and reinforce each other. Home stress can be transported back to the workplace and decrease your motivation, productivity, morale and presenteeism; induce a sense of unfairness; and increase resentment toward the employer.⁵ Similarly, stress at work can add to home stress. Whether at home or at work, stress can diminish an employee’s sense of control, decreasing motivation and making it harder to participate in healthy behaviours.⁶

As much as you may want to protect your children from your problems, the best way to do this is not hiding the problems from your kids and pretending the problems do not exist.

³ Desjardin Financial Security. 2008. “Health is Cool!” survey <http://www.dsf-dfs.com/NR/rdonlyres/1E47B95B-85E0-4A52-93E6-474A2E56D287/0/GatefoldBusinessPeopleHealthisCool.pdf>

⁴ Kleppa, E., Sanne, B. & Tell, G. 2008. Working Overtime is Associated with Anxiety and Depression: The Hordaland Health Study. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*. 50:658-666

⁵ Best Advice on Stress Risk Management in the Workplace. Health Canada. 2000. http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ewh-semt/alt_formats/hecs-sesc/pdf/pubs/occup-travail/stress-part-1/stress-part-1_e.pdf Last retrieved: April 18, 2008.

⁶ Best Advice on Stress Risk Management in the Workplace. Health Canada. 2000. http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ewh-semt/alt_formats/hecs-sesc/pdf/pubs/occup-travail/stress-part-1/stress-part-1_e.pdf Last retrieved: April 18, 2008.

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Experts say the best approach is to inform your children and loved ones about what is going on without catastrophizing or exaggerating the direness of the situation. The Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health suggests that to protect your family you should tune in and talk to your kids. They suggest you “watch for signs that your child is absorbing the news and may be worrying about what it means to his or her family. Make sure your kids understand what’s happening and what, if anything, it means to your family.”⁷

Personal Coping Techniques — for When It Feels Like All You Can Do Is Hold On for the Ride

How you perceive and react to the stressors that you are presented with will determine whether the stressor is a harmful or healthy stress. Practicing self-care and stress management techniques can help you manage your stress and cope with the physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and social demands that are placed on you. Dr. Taylor Alexander, CEO of the Canadian Mental Health Association, says that stress-related problems typically come from individuals lacking resources sufficient to meet the demands placed upon them. It is important to try to remove negative and harmful influences in the workplace and to protect yourself meanwhile. There are many different self-care techniques at work and at home for improving your personal health; try some to see what works best for you.

Mental Health Works, a program of the Canadian Mental Health Association, encourages the employee to “consider approaches to self-care that will enable them to remain balanced and well, to the maximum extent possible.” Mary Ann Baynton, Director of Mental Health Works, also says that what works for one person may not work for another, and to “pick and choose what you think may resonate with your own sense of well-being.” Some of the options for self-care are:

- Avoiding addictive substances
- Consider others’ perspective
- Dedicate an hour a day to improve your mental health
- Eating a healthy diet
- Exercise
- Have a cue as a reminder
- Natural lighting
- Nature
- Positive self-talk
- Sleeping (7–8 hours)
- Smile
- Spirituality
- Yoga

For more information visit:

www.ontario.cmha.ca

www.mentalhealthworks.ca

www.cmha.ca

www.gwlcentreformentalhealth.ca

www.mooddisorders.on.ca

⁷ SIX Steps Protect the Mental Health of Families and Employees in the Face of the Global Financial Market Crisis. Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health.