

Economic woes don't have to equal anxiety and sleeplessness



By Dave Schafer

The woes of the economy are everywhere. You see them on television when you check the local news before going to bed. It's in the morning paper as you eat your oatmeal and drink your coffee.

Even city employees, who aren't seeing layoffs and will see a pay raise in July, can't escape it.

But you don't have to let the economy drive you out of your comfort zone, cause you anxiety or affect your health.

"If you just keep a positive attitude, keep your spending under control, deal with your creditors and keep your priorities in order, you'll be OK," said Rich Barrett, Employee Assistance Program manager. "It seems like things are changing so rapidly right now, but things are always changing. That's just part of the cycle."

Americans have grown used to a high standard of living, and recent generations haven't been through something like this before, he said.

"We have to adapt. And we will. People are adaptable. That doesn't mean it will be easy."

By following some simple guidelines, city employees and their families can stay mentally and physically healthy

during the recession and perhaps come out of it stronger than ever.

Dealing with stress

In an American Psychological Association poll last September, 80 percent of respondents said the economy was causing significant stress, and the National Sleep Foundation said 27 percent of people surveyed last fall had sleeplessness because of economic anxiety.

The health-care community is placing an emphasis on helping people cope with stress, said Dr. Alfreda Bell, a family-medicine physician with Kelsey-Seybold's Houston Center Clinic. More people are coming in with stress-related problems. Stress can cause fatigue, obesity, digestive problems, depression, heart disease and other illnesses.

People need to identify the causes of their stress and remove them, if possible, she said. Learning your stress signals, such as a headache or backache, will help.

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Often, stress results from situations you can't control, and you have to learn how to deal with it in a healthy way. If you smoke to handle stress, chew gum instead, Bell recommends. Don't let stress be an excuse for eating or drinking too much. If necessary, stay away from places where alcohol is available. If you're a stress eater, join a program or a fitness team with co-workers.

"And always be around positive people," Bell said.

Don't be afraid of joining a group, she said. "Patients involved in a group tend to do better. They feel better after talking out their problems. Sometimes you don't need to take medications to get over your anxiety or depression or stress. Sometimes, just talking to someone helps.

"Some people are ashamed to seek help. But they shouldn't be. We all feel overwhelmed sometimes."

Employees can talk to a professional for free at the employee assistance offices. To set up an appointment, call 713-964-9906.

Dealing with money

Getting your finances in order will relieve stress, too. Barrett said some employees are concerned about paying bills after losing a second job, getting

their hours cut back in that job, or their spouse losing a job.

"People panic because their budget was set on a higher amount," he said.

In tough times, people have to look hard at their spending priorities, he said. People need housing, clothes and food. They don't need big-screen TVs.

"The quickest way to give yourself a pay raise is to not spend money," Barrett said. "Is it time to cut back on extras?"

People should always be prepared for a drop in income, Barrett said. Start cutting back now in anticipation of what might happen in the future.

"If you start to cut back now, then you'll be in a healthier place to deal with something if it happens," he said.

Cutting extravagant expenses doesn't have to be painful, he said. Just focus on short-term changes. "We can survive any changes in the short term."

Later, you may decide you don't need those trimmed items.

Paying down credit cards will help. Most of all, Barrett said, don't assume that all the gloom and doom you hear in the media applies to you. If you're worried about your financial situation, see a financial advisor. EAP can also help you create a budget.

Dealing with drug costs

An Associated Press analysis found diabetics are cutting back on doctor visits, insulin, medicines and blood-sugar testing as they lose insurance and income during the recession.

"For those with medical issues, such as heart disease, high-blood pressure and diabetes, they do need to take their medications," Bell said. "That doesn't change."

Taking generics or cheaper alternative medications can save money. So can ordering maintenance drugs through mail order, where you can get a three-month supply for the price of a two-month supply. To order mail-order prescriptions from Prime Therapeutics, call 877-357-7463.

Also, people should take advantage of health fairs and other free programs, Bell said. "Of course you should go to your doctor, but any way you can monitor your health is good," Bell said.

The city has free programs for seniors, free exercise classes at community centers, and free nutrition programs at health service centers. These include the Women, Infants and Children program that provides nutritious food to low-income families, and the Area Agency on Aging that provides services for older residents.

According to the Center for American Progress' action fund, about 14,000 Americans lose their health insurance each day. Members of the city's health insurance plans don't have to worry about that.

"City employees have it as well as anybody I know," Barrett said.

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The American Psychological Association offers the following tips to help you stay resilient during tough economic times:

1

Accept that change is part of life - You may have to change your goals or make changes to your lifestyle. Accepting circumstances that you cannot change can help you focus on circumstances that you can alter.

2

Make connections - Good relationships with close family members, friends or others are important because they can provide help and support.

3

Keep things in perspective - Try to avoid the "chicken little" attitude that the sky is falling. Realize that this situation will pass.

4

Look for opportunities - People often learn something about themselves when going through a difficult situation. Use a crisis as a chance to grow professionally or personally.

5

Be mindful of the good things in your life - Resilient people count their blessings.

6

Maintain a hopeful outlook - No one can reverse what has happened. But by being resilient, you can change how you interpret and respond to events.

7

Talk to a psychologist - Sometimes dealing with stress by yourself can be overwhelming and frightening.

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Dealing with your health

Maintaining good health is as simple during a recession as it was during the booming '90s, Bell said. Adults should drink plenty of water, do 30 minutes of moderately intensive exercise five days a week, get about eight hours of sleep a night, avoid too much caffeine, and schedule time for themselves.

"It's important to take care of yourself," she said. "When you have problems, reach out for support."

And continue to eat healthy, even if it costs a little more. There are cost benefits there. Experts fear the recession will lead to an obesity boom because people will buy cheap and unhealthy foods.

More than one-third of U.S. adults and 16 percent of children are obese,

according to the Centers for Disease and Prevention.

"Things are going to get worse. Obesity is a toxic result of a falling economic environment," Adam Drewnowski, director of the Nutrition Sciences Program at the University of Washington, told Reuters.

"People ... are going to economize, and as they save money on food they will be eating more empty calories or foods high in sugar, saturated fats and refined grains," he said.

McDonald's posted a better-than-expected third-quarter profit, helped by a 7 percent jump in global sales. Whole Foods, a grocery that stocks organic, natural and gourmet food at premium prices, saw just a .4 percent increase in its September quarter, compared to an 8.2 percent increase in the same period last year, according to Reuters.

For tips on eating healthy, visit www.mayoclinic.com/health/nutrition-and-healthy-eating/MY00431

Dealing with the recession

"This is a recession. We will get through it," Barrett said.

Keeping a positive attitude and your priorities in order will make a huge difference, he said.

"We think of things as our priorities, but they're not. People are what's important.

"Do you love your kids and treat them well and provide for them the things they need? Do you love and support your spouse? Do you maintain a positive outlook when others can't? Do you help others and support your friends?

"If you do that, you'll have a support group. You'll be OK." 