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Economy takes psychological toll

Experts say hard times are driving more to seek professional help

*By Tony Kindelspire
 Longmont Times-Call*

LONGMONT — Mental health professionals say the daily drumbeat of bad economic news is taking its toll on people and driving an increase in the numbers of people seeking professional help.

Fear of job loss, fear of being unable to find a job, fear of being unable to financially support their family are themes that have become more common in conversations between therapists and clients, said Dr. Stephanie Smith, an Erie psychologist.

“There’s definitely been an increase in referrals, and even more than that, I’ve been seeing more and more people who have been patients already talking about it,” said Smith, who’s also the public education coordinator for Colorado for the American Psychological Association.

Daily newspaper headlines and television and radio newscasts about the economy are “causing all of us anxiety,” Smith said.

“It creeps in whether we want it to or not,” she said. “At least, I have not met anyone yet who is immune to that.”

Stress is a natural part of life, Smith said, but sustained high levels of stress can devastate a person’s well-being.

“High levels of stress affect every area of the body,” she said. “It affects our brain health, our cardiovascular health. It affects our immune system’s ability to ward off illness and disease.”

And aside from a catastrophic event — death of a loved one, or being diagnosed with a serious disease, for example — financial stress can be some of the most insidious, Smith said.

“I think financial stress is terribly taxing,” she said. “Money, like it or not, is not something we can escape.”

Maria Yost, an employment adviser with Workforce Boulder County, works daily with people who have just lost their jobs and are looking for work.

“We’re seeing people that are having the emotional and mental effects (of stress),” she said.

Helpful phone numbers

The Mental Health Centers Serving Boulder and Broomfield Counties:

Medical emergency: Call 911

Mental health crisis hot line (24 hours a day, seven days a week): 303-447-1665

For information about services (8 a.m. to 6 p.m. weekdays): 303-413-6263

Child crises: 303-413-6388

Student needs: 303-413-6204

General number: 303-443-8500

Identifying and handling extreme stress

Symptoms:

- Irritability
- Trouble sleeping
- Changes in appetite
- Headaches/stomachaches
- Intestinal problems
- Nervousness
- Excessive worry
- Feeling sad or depressed

Stress-busting tips:

- Pay attention to what’s happening around you, but refrain from getting

If necessary, Yost refers them to professional services such as The Mental Health Centers Serving Boulder and Broomfield Counties.

But she also can refer them to Workforce's internal programs, such as workshops for people age 55 and older. Such workshops help people see there are others in the same boat, Yost said.

Longmont residents account for about one-third of the clients seeking help at The Mental Health Service Centers of Boulder and Broomfield Counties, development director Kitty deKieffer said. The agency has an office in Longmont at 529 Coffman St.

"We've seen our numbers increase over the last year or two, but we've definitely seen those numbers increase even more in the past couple of months," deKieffer said.

A 2008 survey by the American Psychological Association found that troubles in the economy tend to have a stronger effect on women.

The APA poll, whose results were released in October, found that 83 percent of women said they were stressed out about money, compared with 78 percent of men. Generation X women, those ages 30 to 43, were the most concerned about money of any of the age groups surveyed.

Smith, a self-described Gen-Xer, said the bulk of her patients are in that age group.

She said she's not sure why women tend to be more affected by a recessionary economy but theorizes that women, in general, are less financially secure than men. Also, women in families tend to be the primary caretakers of the household and children, which can mean additional stress.

"They tend to be stretched very thin already, and then financial stress on top of this ..." Smith said.

But men are not immune. In general, men often get their sense of self from their career, she said, so a job loss can hurt their self-image.

For either gender, Smith said, it's important that people identify factors that are causing them extra stress and treat those factors in healthy ways. Being in a bad mood is one thing, for example, but spending a month being irritable is quite another.

"It's very important to remember the things we have control over and focus on those things," Smith said. "Sometimes it takes a lot of thought to determine the things we really have control over."

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caught up in doom-and-gloom hype.

- Take stock of your situation and recognize what's causing your stress.

- Reach out to family, friends and trusted advisers.

- Take time for yourself.

- Volunteer your time.

- Stay physically active and take care of your health.

- Don't be ashamed to seek professional help.

Source: American Psychological Association