

Keeping your head in the recession

THE effects of a worldwide recession are not just seen in facts and figures, stock market crashes and interest rates; the real toll is seen in the strain on families, individuals, employers and employees, illustrated by rising numbers of people suffering mental health problems.

However, there are measures you can take to ensure you and your family come out fighting.

Dr Rajiv Singh, clinical service director of the Mental Health and Addictions Service at Waikato District Health Board, and Dr Andrew Darby, consultant psychiatrist and clinical director of Urban Adult Mental Health Service (Inpatient) at Waikato District Health Board say unemployment, job insecurity and lowering or lack of a living wage will significantly effect health in general and mental health in particular.

But an adverse outcome is not the only possibility and services are gearing up to help people in need.

"People can exert a sense of control over their lives in the face of potentially stressful circumstances," Dr Singh says.

Despite this positive approach, international figures are grim. The United Kingdom shadow health secretary says the number of people with mental health problems will rise by 26 per cent by 2010, a number echoed by New Zealand Mental Health Commission chairman Dr Peter McGeorge in the Waikato Times last month. He said every 1 per cent rise in unemployment will lead to a 2-3 per cent jump in risk for mental health problems.

There is also evidence from Australia, and the World Health Organisation which suggests economic recession could result in an increase in mental health problems. The increase has been demonstrated in the past with previous downturns.

"There is strong evidence in supporting the notion that job loss has a negative impact on psychological wellbeing, in particular depression, and that distress levels fall following re-employment," Dr Singh says.

"Employment not only has a manifest purpose (earning a living), but also several additional functions. It causes a person's day-to-day life to be structured, encourages social contact, links individuals to supra-individual goals

and purpose; and allows the use of one's skills and social status."

Dr Singh says job loss affects mental health, with an associated loss of self-esteem and self-worth.

The most common mental health problems include depression, anxiety and substance use disorders, as people turn to coping methods they are familiar with, such as alcohol, cannabis and tobacco.

Financial strain also affects mental health.

"Studies show financial compensation has a beneficial impact. For many people, debt worsened their mental distress," Dr Darby says.

"Financial hardship has the potential for home repossession. This can induce a specific negative impact on mental health that goes beyond financial hardship, perhaps related to the meaning we ascribe to home ownership and to the 'provider function' for families. There is some evidence that unemployment affects men more than women, perhaps mirroring traditional cultural constructs around being a bread-winner and not being able to provide for the family.

"The stress and tension of unemployment affects the whole family. Literature suggests children of fathers who could not find employment were at risk of socio-emotional problems, deviant behaviours, depression, low self-esteem and other consequences," Dr Darby says.

In May, Dr Peter McGeorge called for a public health campaign giving the newly unemployed advice on how to cope, and urged DHBs to establish support groups and help lines. The Waikato District Health Board has already starting planning.

"We plan to work closely with primary health care providers to ensure people are supported as much as possible.

"It is also very important to remember that in the face of challenging times, the vast majority of people cope, and cope well."



WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP YOURSELF AND YOUR FAMILY?

- Take control. Create realistic coping strategies, financial plans and goals. Share them with family or trusted confidants.
- Place things in perspective. Although current circumstances may be difficult, take a longer-term view of your life – you will get through it.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle. Eat well, sleep normal hours and exercise regularly.
- Think positively. Focus on the positive aspects of your life to counter negative feelings and emotions.
- Share, talk and accept. Sharing concerns with family and close friends will relieve some of the stress. They may also be able to help.
- Maintain a regular structure to your daily life.
- If anxiety or depression start affecting normal life (eg. impaired sleep, appetite, ability to work, enjoyment, relationships and intimacy), professional help may be required. Seek help early.
- Help others – it's therapeutic.

There are agencies that can help, ranging from GPs to counsellors and support services including: Webhealth (www.waikato.webhealth.co.nz), Hamilton Budgeting Service, Presbyterian Support Services, Catholic Social Services, The Nest, Hamilton Gambling Association, Birthright, Leading Edge Foundation, WINZ, and Anglican Support Services.

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