



FOOD FOR THOUGHT FROM YOUR
EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

BEATING "RECESSION STRESS"!

HOW TO MAINTAIN EMOTIONAL BALANCE...
IN TIMES OF FINANCIAL INSTABILITY!



What is "Recession Stress"?

Recession Stress is the uncomfortable feeling that comes from our personal finances being negatively impacted by downward changes occurring in the U.S. and world economies. In a recession, **most** of us will "at least" experience **indirect stress**; becoming emotionally uncomfortable because of what is happening around us and losing confidence in the economy and our sense of future security. **Many** of us will experience **direct stress**; enduring losses in the value of investments, increases in the cost of living and a decline in the value and marketability of our homes. Finally, **some** of us will encounter **traumatic stress**; actually losing jobs, homes and/or savings with little hope for a quick return to our previous standard of living and level of emotional comfort.

What are the symptoms of "Recession Stress"?

- **Worry and Pessimism** about your personal finances and future lifestyle (retirement, education, home ownership, etc).
- **Powerlessness** to personally correct the situation.
- **Anxiety and Uncertainty** about whether and when things might get better.
- **Feelings of Failure and Self-Blame** that in some way your education, earning potential and/or spending or savings habits brought you to this point.
- **Shame and Embarrassment** over not being able to meet bills or the expectations of those you support (particularly your children).
- **Grief and Sadness** over the loss of a home, vehicle or standard of living.
- **Anger and irritability** over the situation, but often misdirected on to others close to you or toward yourself.
- **Loss/Alteration of Your "Life Plan"** by being forced to push back a planned vacation or retirement, have an adult child return home to live, put off a college education, sell a home or vehicle, or other change in the upward direction and quality of your financial life.
- **Physical symptoms** associated with the above emotions including problems with sleep and appetite, headaches and other muscle tension, GI problems, the inability to sit still and focus, "hair-trigger" emotions such as easily crying or exploding or just feeling "anxious" for no apparent reason.

Is having “Recession Stress” “normal” or “crazy”?

It is **normal** to feel **crazy** in financial times like these. Remember, it’s not us who are crazy... it’s the situation! Our emotions are accurately reflecting the “financial instability” our economy is going through. Also, we are experiencing the very real consequences of financial situations beyond our control. The constant swings in the stock market, our loss of purchasing power due to inflation and the lack of a “light at the end of the tunnel” all leave us feeling **powerless** and **out of control**. The reality is that most people feel the same way and while uncomfortable, such feelings are perfectly **normal**.

If Recession Stress is normal, why do I worry and feel personally responsible?

It is very normal during difficult times to **worry** about the future and engage in the human tendency for **self-blame**. Some people have created their own financial crises by living beyond their means, borrowing money they could never repay or acting financially irresponsible in some other way. However, most are simply “victims” of the economy who **worry** about and feel **responsible** for their financial situation, but didn’t cause it.

There are at least 2 reasons **why people may feel personally responsible** in such situations. **First, self-blame is an attempt to regain control**. The logic is as follows... “If I can only figure out what I did to get into this mess, then clearly I can reverse it and get back to normal.” The psychological reality is that for many people “**self-blame and worry with some hope**” **simply feel better than “hopelessness over a disastrous situation”**. **Worry**, paradoxically, gives us some hope, but takes away comfort.

The **second reason** people may blame themselves is because **yesterday’s good decisions often look bad in light of today’s circumstances**. The DEA Employees who invested in the TSP C Fund because of its 11% historic return, but later lost money, or person who took a loan because a bank officer said “You can afford it”, may now be blaming themselves for **bad decision-making**. The old saying, “It seemed like a good idea at the time.” is actually often true for many of today’s financial situations. Unfortunately, changing circumstances may turn yesterday’s excellent decision into today’s regret.

So what can I do to feel better?

1. **First, do a financial reality check**. Make an assessment of your **actual financial health**. Without considering the value of your investments or any property, look at whether your household income is covering all of your current expenses. If it is, you should consider yourself in **good financial health**. If it is not, assess whether or not you are **at least** able to meet your expenses for food, housing, healthcare and essential transportation (to and from work). If it is, you should consider yourself in **adequate financial health**. If it is not, consider yourself in **questionable financial health**.

2. Immediately make as many necessary adjustments in your finances and lifestyle as you can. Be proactive, but be realistic. If you need to “tighten your belt”... DO IT! One simple technique recommended by financial planners is to rework your budget based on your spending of five years ago. Pull out your checkbook or bills and see **what** you were spending money on then and **how much**. Most people are shocked to see the how their **wants have become needs** and their **luxuries have become essentials**. TV cable, HBO, cell phones, internet, text messaging, Nike sneakers, breakfast or lunch in the cafeteria and Starbucks latte’s are no more life-essential today than they were five years ago, but cutting them out just might save you a bundle.

3. Do an emotional reality check... Separate financial fact from stress-driven fiction. What is your **true state of financial health**? How much of your discomfort is based on **actual financial problems**, versus worry, pessimism and just being bombarded each day with bad financial news? If you have real financial problems, are there any solutions you have written off because they have made you (or others close to you) emotionally uncomfortable. Put them back on the “option list.”

4. Normalize your stress responses as understandable in these abnormal financial times. Most of today’s financial situation is beyond out control, so feelings of powerlessness are understandable. In unstable situations unsettled feelings **are normal** and appropriate. So give yourself permission to feel *unsettled*. Discuss the situation with others who are experiencing the same reaction. You’ll find that **you’re not the only one** feeling this way. In a small boat on a rough sea, it is normal to rock and get seasick.

5. Do not panic or make emotionally-driven and impulsive financial decisions. Don’t let your emotional discomfort be the basis for financial action. Ask, “Are my financial strategies unduly affected by my feelings?” If at all possible, do not empty or stop contributing to your TSP account; you will be passing up an extra 4% salary. Do not sell stocks and mutual funds just on the fear that the Market will “only go lower”; you will amplify your loses. Do not borrow more money or use credit cards to cover existing debt or bills; you will only make your financial recovery longer and more difficult.

6. Be open to any solutions that might work. Selling your “dream home” (and at a loss), allowing a prized vehicle to be repossessed, using public transportation, consolidating debts with the help of a financial planner or even filing for personal bankruptcy are unimaginable to most us. Yet each might be part of a viable **financial recovery plan**. Remember to use your brain and the advice of experts (but not your guts) to assess the viability of solutions.

7. Take the “long view”. Be patient! You may have to “reschedule” (but not cancel) some financial goals. Saving for a child’s college education, buying a house or building a retirement account may now all take longer than they would have a year or two ago. A recent study suggested that employees with contributory retirement plans (such as the TSP) might need to work an additional 1-3 years in order to meet their pre-recession goals. Most of us will still be able to meet our financial goals, but we may not be able to accomplish them within previously anticipated time frames.

8. Monitor and alter your problematic self-talk and worry. Realize that stress is often the outward expression of a very negative and often irrational internal dialog about a situation. Listen to that dialog! If you hear yourself passing emotional judgments on yourself or others or speaking in “negative absolutes” **rewrite that script!** Determine what aspects of your financial situations you did and did not cause. Forgive yourself for any bad financial choices in the past. Take decisive action to begin correcting mistakes without condemnation for making them in the first place.

9. Avoid Recession Stress Triggers. “Triggers” are environmental and emotional “cues” that cause automatic (and usually uncomfortable) emotional responses. If you find that the newspaper, magazines, the internet, pay statements, bills, your checkbook, and innocent discussions with friends (or anything else) seem to create **recession stress**, limit your exposure. Avoid CNBC and the business section of the newspaper. Look at the value of your investments only when absolutely necessary (like tax time). Stop checking your TSP balance and rates of return. If you don’t like dirt, get out of the mud!

10. Take really good care of yourself. When we lose control of some aspect of our lives, our levels of stress and worry rise. Paradoxically we are often less likely take good care of ourselves (something we actually do control) just when we need it the most. Here are some simple things you can do to feel less stressed and more in control:

- a. **Ventilate...** Get things off your chest with a good listener. ID solutions.
- b. **Exercise...** 20-30 minutes, 3-5 times per week. It burns stress & tension.
- c. **Recreate...** “Schedule” a hobby or just some fun. Laughter defeats stress.
- d. **Eat Right...** Eat for energy & quality not stress reduction & quantity.
- e. **Get Enough Sleep...** 7-8 hours. Shortened or poor sleep increases stress.
- f. **Restore Balance...** Give Family, work, friends and yourself equal time.
- g. **Seek Serenity...** Through prayer, meditation, relaxation, rebalancing, etc.
- h. **Reach Out to Others...** You’ll gain perspective and make a difference.

11. Seek professional assistance if needed. We all have limits, and it’s a wise person who knows when they’ve reached them. Professional counseling for money management and assistance with stress can be sought at any time, but are generally advisable when the intensity, frequency or number of problems continues to grow despite our best efforts to curb them and/or whenever our financial situation or stress level is causing disruptions in our health, emotional comfort, thought processes, work or relationships with others.

IF YOU HAVE DECIDED THAT PROFESSIONAL ASSISTANCE WOULD BE HELPFUL, HERE ARE 2 FREE RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO DEA EMPLOYEES AND FAMILY MEMBERS...

FIRST: Use DEA's Free LifeCare Program To Find Even More Suggestions and Resources for Managing Your Financial Concerns...

- Get free consultations with a Financial Counselor and advice on budget preparation and financial planning
- Get articles to help you manage money
- Find out how you can stick to a realistic budget with free guides, helpful tips, and interactive calculators
- Learn how to cope with stress and worry associated with the economy
- Log on to find helpful articles on money management and budgeting
- Call for personalized referrals to financial planners and other useful resources

Log on to www.lifecare.com and enter Screen Name: **usdoj** and Password: **dea** (case sensitive). For assistance logging on, contact the Help Desk at 1-888-604-9565. Or call 800-873-4636 (or 800-873-1322 for TTY/TDD service) to discuss your needs with a LifeCare specialist 24 hours a day.

SECOND: You can call DEA's Employee Assistance Program for Free, Confidential Counseling or Consultation to Help with Recession Stress or Any Other Issues You feel are Important...

The EAP is prepared to assist with almost any type of problem (or question) that you or a member of your family might have. We can help you clarify sources of personal distress, find solutions that reduce or resolve problems or identify specialized sources of assistance when problems are beyond the scope of our in-house expertise. Free, confidential EAP counseling is available to DEA employees and families almost everywhere in the U.S., Alaska, Hawaii & Caribbean.

Have more questions? Visit The EAP's website on WebSter simply clicking on the EAP logo or on the Internet at www.dea.gov, Programs and Operations, Employee Assistance Program. We're also available 24 hours-a-day call by calling 1-800-275-7460.

DEA EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM
EAP HELP-LINE 1-800-275-7460
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