

# Responding to client stress in these stressful economic times

Jennifer A. Neben

OISE U of T, 1st year, area of studies: Counseling Psychology Program

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With the recent downturn in the economy and the steady borage of employment layoffs within many Canadian workplaces this past year, the impact of financial stress is likely an increasing concern of many counseling psychololgy clients. Financial stress and unemployment have indeed been linked to depression and anxiety.

As a psychology student I have seen first hand how issues such as marital conflict and/or pre-existing anxiety can be exacerbated by the additional burden of financial hardship. Job loss or reduced work hours can also pose an impediment to some individuals obtaining ongoing counseling for themselves or family members and may even lead to some clients ending counseling sessions prematurely.

As a result of job loss causing increased stress and potentially affecting the willingness or ability of clients to pay for counseling, job loss greatly affects both psychologists and psychology students alike. As a counseling psychology PhD student I am particularly interested in the issue of our struggling economy not just because funding grants and opportunities are jeopardized, but also because job stress leads to changes in client needs and to clients seeking reduced rate counseling. My M.A. practicum site has indeed recently reported receiving an increased number of calls from clients seeking reduced intern rates. The practice is also receiving more calls from men who are experiencing psychological distress as a result of losing their job and according to

recent newspaper headlines men all across Canada are calling crisis lines and reporting job-related stress in unprecedented numbers.

As psychologists and students, we can better respond to client needs by having increased knowledge about the psychological impacts of job loss and available options for addressing associated stress. For example, teach clients to recognize the ways that they cope with stress (both healthy and unhealthy) and help them to capitalize on positive coping strategies, such as maintaining balanced thinking, brainstorming, simplifying their finances and remaining organized. Encourage healthy stress-reducing activities such as walking and exercise, relaxation and social support. Also help clients to understand what money and work mean in terms of their own values and identity. Lastly, recognize when a referral to another professional, such as a financial planner, debt counselor, or career counselor may be warranted.

Strategies for managing stress and recognizing the need for an outside professional are not just important for clients; they also important for psychology professionals themselves who are supporting clients who face more problems, have fewer resources, attend sessions less frequently and may also be requesting reduced fees. The counseling psychology practice where I completed my placement has decided to offer a free stress management consultation to individuals who have recently lost their job. Although this could be helpful to some

clients, offering free services could pose additional challenges for psychology professionals. Aside from potential issues with motivation, many clients will likely require additional sessions to adequately address their needs and decisions will then have to be made about how to ethically respond, particularly if community referrals for free counseling services are not available. These issues present concerns for professionals who may then subsequently experience their own increase in work-related stress. As a result students and

professionals must be fully aware of the issue of compassion fatigue and the need for self-care. When responding to increased demands from clients, professionals could consider increasing their use of professional peer support or supervision. To address client financial needs professionals may consider seeing some clients less frequently and/or in groups. For professionals who choose to offer pro bono or reduced fee services, decisions will need to be made on how to balance public need with the need of maintaining a viable professional practice.