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CEO of worker-aid program: Layoff impact is widespread

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Workers who are suddenly out of a job — sometimes escorted by security and given a few minutes to claim their personal possessions before being led to the door — are obviously stressed out by the process.

But they're not the only ones.

Both the survivors — those who didn't get laid off, but are now waiting for the other shoe to fall — and the supervisors of the former employees are often anxious, too.

It can affect these workers' spouses and families, as well, says Don Jorgensen, president and CEO of Jorgensen Brooks Group, a Tucson employee assistance program covering about 150,000 employees and dependents in Southern Arizona.

Jorgensen says first-quarter 2009 calls for emergency assistance program (often referred to as EAP) services to Jorgensen Brooks Group are up 20 percent over the same period last year.

He warns that people may not recognize the manifestations of stress about job loss, or the threat of losing one's job, including sleeplessness, loss of sex drive, and drug and alcohol abuse.

Here, Jorgensen answers questions about the growing problem:

Q: What are some typical manifestations of stress related to the loss of a job, or concern about job security?

A: Increased anxiety. Some level of depression is the result of prolonged stress. They manifest themselves in emotional responses, including anxiety, depression and sometimes physical or health problems, too. Increased susceptibility to general illnesses, for example.

Q: What is the most common problem?

A: The No. 1 assessed problem is still relationship conflict. But now the relationship is often stressed because of financial or job loss concerns.

Q: Is that new, or was it a factor before?

A: Both. There's always great anxiety about finding jobs or loss of income given the close link to self-worth. And the mind-body connection, the physical consequences of stress, such as loss of sleep, restlessness, irritability, loss of sex drive can put a toll on relationships.

Q: Are most of the calls from co-workers of those who were fired?

A: We are also getting more from supervisors because of the stress of laying people off. Also, their own personal stress and increased workloads add to the job stress. Job sharing used to be two people sharing one job; now, it's one person doing two jobs.

Q: What can people do if they're experiencing stress/anxiety over economic conditions but they don't have an employee assistance program benefit?

A: First, avoid self-destructive coping responses. Avoid self-medicating with alcohol or drugs, or engaging in excessive eating or spending binges. Create a "stress action plan" to take control of your life. Prioritize your goals in each area of your life, reach out to family and support systems, and utilize tension reduction strategies, including exercise and healthy activities. Avoid isolation and procrastination.

Q: Does stress from uncertainty about economic stability, job loss or the fear of job loss, manifest itself in dependents — spouses and children?

A: Money and work stress are pervasive and can spill over onto the family in the form of anger, frustration, depression. Family members may react by withdrawing from one another, increasing any existing marital, sibling or parent-child conflict. Stress is best managed when couples are able to work as allies versus adversaries in offering mutual support in troubled times.

Q: Have you noticed any differences in the way employees handle economic instability? For instance, is it different for line workers and the hourly ranks than for white-collar and management people?

A: Blue-collar workers may be more able or more likely to seek a second job to supplement or replace lost income, whereas white-collar workers may be forced to work longer hours and not have the option. The emotional and psychological impacts are the same, and the reactions and ability to cope with stress depend on the individual's attitude, strengths and support systems.

Q: Is there any additional point you'd like to make about workplace stress in these tough economic times?

A: In stressful times, successful employers remain proactive. Many understand that 90 percent of workplace problems—from accidents to job conflict—result from employees' personal problems, and that most of these issues can be treated or resolved successfully when identified early. Workplace interventions like a responsive employee assistance service minimize the human costs and offer practical solutions for the individual and the employer.

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