

Greenwich Time

Stressed out?

From therapy to massage, people seek relief from financial meltdown

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Stressed out about the economy?

You're not alone.

As the financial markets have been sinking, people's stress levels have been soaring, spurring many to seek out ways to cope.

From hedge fund managers needing a relaxing massage, to women seeking counseling for their frazzled husbands to retirees worried about their shrinking investments, Greenwich health services are being inundated by people seeking relief from their growing stress over their flagging finances.

"One woman gained seven pounds in two weeks watching the stock market," said Henri Roca, medical director of the Greenwich Hospital Center for Integrative Medicine. "Retired people literally sit in front of the TV and watch the bouncing ball (of the stock market) and get extremely stressed out."

The center, which combines traditional medical care with techniques such as massage, acupuncture and yoga, is fielding a growing number of calls related to the tanking economy, Roca said.

"We're getting phone calls from spouses, 'Can you do something to help my husband; he's so stressed out,'" said Roca, adding that he hasn't seen anyone depressed to the point of having suicidal thoughts.

"People are extremely stressed out and it has gotten worse," said Dr. Cheryl Wilczak, who runs Harbor Bridge Emotional Health, a counseling service on West Putnam Avenue.

"I have people from financial institutions like AIG, Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley," Wilczak said. "People have lost their family savings. People are losing their homes; they're losing their jobs. It's pretty remarkable."

All that financial stress is contributing to a rise in marital discord, said Wilczak, who counsels individuals, families and married couples.

Besides mounting emotional issues related to the financial crisis, stress is also having an impact on people's bodies, health officials say. Anxiety is manifesting itself in several ways, including headaches, neck and shoulder pain and difficulty breathing.

"People under high stress have the 'turtle reflex,' " said Bob Jensen, owner of Greenwich Healing Hands Therapeutic Massage on Mason Street. "We don't have shells, so people pull their shoulders up around their ears. It's an instinct to protect the neck. It tightens up areas around the neck and shoulders and causes headaches and a lot of other problems."

That's where services like massage therapy come in.

"I'm as busy as I can possibly be; there are so many people coming in under high stress," Jensen said. "I know people who used to work for AIG who lost huge chunks of their retirements. I have others who run hedge funds who are sustaining losses and have to deal with their own clients."

Jensen recalled one massage client who manages the pension and 401(k) plans for a Fortune 500 company.

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"The person is limited in what they can do by federal regulations and is worried about thousands of employees," Jensen said.

Jensen also cited insurance industry people concerned about their own survival since their deals with AIG have been cut way back and their retirement funds have taken huge hits.

It's been a similar story for Tim Gemelli, co-owner of Greenwich-based Massage Mavens, which provides in-home and in-office sessions.

"We've got a lot of heads of major firms who have been laying off employees as well as losing money," Gemelli said. "We're getting more corporate clients. We're doing chair massages for a lot of traders at their desks.

"I was just at the grocery store talking to a client who was ready to book a session for tomorrow."

Workdays have been turning into work nights and weekends for area mental health workers and massage therapists, as they struggle to keep up with demand for their services.

Wilczak, of Harbor Bridge Emotional Health, has been so booked up that she's been seeing clients sometimes until 10 p.m.

Many people in the Greenwich area who work in New York City are requesting massages in the evenings when they get home and on the weekends, Gemelli said.

"We do have quite a few on weekends with people decompressing from the week," Gemelli said. "And then when they go back to work on Monday, they need another massage."

Economic stress has been so great, health officials

say, that people are seeking new ways to cope with their problems.

"People who have never sought therapy for any reason are doing so now because of the financial crisis," Wilczak said.

LuAnn Murphy, a licensed clinical social worker at the Greenwich Hospital Outpatient Center, said the center recently has received more phone calls asking for service.

"[Financial stress] may be one of the tipping points that gets them into treatment," she said.

Greenwich Alcoholics Anonymous representatives declined to provide data on membership during the recent financial crisis, but one member acknowledged that the organization is feeling the effects.

"We have professional people and people from across the community; it's affecting us like anybody else," said an AA member who declined to be identified.

For those people with pre-existing emotional problems, the financial crisis may be the straw that broke the camel's back, mental health professionals say.

"This has pushed them over another edge," Roca said.

Though health services don't offer financial bailouts, officials say they can provide ways to deal with the stress brought on by financial difficulties.

"People need to tell themselves that a situation like this doesn't last forever," Wilczak said. "They need to learn specific techniques to cope with stress now.

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"The interesting thing is, some people have the attitude that the (economic turmoil) creates new opportunities for people. Those are the people that tend to pull out of it the fastest."

The Greenwich Hospital Center for Integrative Medicine has a wide array of treatment techniques for people in emotional and physical distress, Roca said.

"We don't have a magic bullet," Roca said. "But if people are willing to work at it, they can be anxiety-free."

Greenwich Time will follow the implications of the economic crisis for our community in this periodic series of stories we call 'Coping in Greenwich.'

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