

There's a new disorder called recession anxiety



Veronica Walsh who is a cognitive behavioural therapist. Photo: Kyran O'Brien

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IT'S THAT time of year when the stretch in the evenings and the promise of spring weather heralds lighter moods and a new optimism all around.

However, there's no getting away from the fact that for many families and individuals throughout the country, times are tough, finances are stretched and stress-related illnesses are on the increase.

Our message to those in trouble is, don't suffer in silence, there is a lot of help out there, no matter what your situation. This week we spoke to three professional women whose work involves getting people through the toughest of times, personally and professionally. They give us their advice on coping with the recession, dealing with stress and the best ways to take care of your mental health.

'it's easy to develop a negative view that clouds everything'

Veronica Walsh (right) is a cognitive behavioural therapist and personal development trainer. She works with individuals and organisations, teaching them coping skills using cognitive behavioural therapy.

She says: "A recession as deep as this has a huge effect on people, and not just through the obvious issues of unemployment and extreme financial worries, it also generally shoots all and sundry with the classic mental health bullets - increased worry, unwelcome change, uncertainty, insecurity, lowered expectations, even loss of any expectations.

Coping

"So it's very easy for people to develop a pervading negative view that clouds everything so that they fall into anxiety or depression and lose their coping skills. It can happen to anybody; it sneaks up on you."

Veronica says that she's finding that for more and more people, their stress is turning into an actual disorder - the New York Times called it 'economic stress' and 'economic anxiety' - where their excessive worry becomes a vicious circle, and that then builds and becomes physical, with general shakiness, and varying degrees of a thumping heart, disrupted breathing, a sick feeling in their stomach, overheating, insomnia, a feeling of discomfort and wrongness, fatigue - all of that.

"This is actually the classic physiology of 'fight or flight', it's a panic attack.

"But because it's often simmering at a low or moderate level, without actual hyperventilating and needing a paper bag, most people don't realise exactly what's going on, they think it's just how it is, that it's just how they are. But it's real, and it's fixable.

"An anxiety disorder, whether it's low or moderate or extreme, is a very real condition, just like diabetes or high blood pressure is - so my hope is that people won't feel ashamed, that they'll investigate what it is and how to deal with it, just like they would with any other condition.

Challenging

"We need to work on our mental health in practical ways in these challenging times, learning how to develop better coping skills for this new world. It's even possible for people to do it themselves in a self-help way once they've got the right information and homework - but that's the thing, there's homework, you've got to put the work in."

Veronica advises: "Most of the things we worry about never happen - or as Mark Twain said, 'I have been through some terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened'.

"Learning rational, calm, thinking skills can be life changing and helps to free us from giving up our one and only life to exhausting endless worry. We can develop new problem-solving and coping skills, and spend the rest of the time living in the present and enjoy the things that are still here to enjoy."

'lots of people are unhappy at work, but fear change'

Mandy Spencer-Hunt (left) is a career coach and psychologist who runs flourishdevelopment.com. She works with businesses and individuals to support personal and professional growth and development. She uses tools like psychometric testing to discover what career areas different people are suited to.

Mandy sees every day how the recession has adversely affected people's working lives and how investing in career guidance and personal growth is so important. She believes that in a difficult economic climate when businesses are trying to stay afloat and employees are not moving, there is potential for a stalemate situation with people becoming demotivated and depressed due to lack of opportunity and growth.

"As someone who works in the HR area, I have seen a marked difference in how people approach their careers. Before the recession, people moved around more, obviously, as there were more jobs and more

choices for people to switch career. Now, things are very different.

"People are not moving and when they do it's a very considered and well-thought out move. This is where career guidance becomes a very important investment. Career guidance, CV and interview preparation can help a person identify their key skills, abilities and preferences, which are key to finding and getting the right job.

Talents

"I see a lot of people who are really unhappy at work. Sometimes, just to acknowledge what is going on and making a commitment to change makes a difference. Recognising problems and deciding to do something about them is essential for good mental health. Knowledge is everything. And knowing what you are good at and where your talents can be best directed is vital for self-esteem and confidence.

"One area of career guidance which is becoming increasingly important is working with students who are coming to Leaving Certificate time and, along with their parents, are starting to panic about which college course to pick. It is a very expensive mistake to make with a high percentage of students dropping out of their chosen course in the first year, only to have to start again on a different course.

"I think it is important that people see the value of investing in their own personal growth. You are worth it. Even if people don't avail of professional advice, there are hundreds of tools on line which people can use to help themselves develop their skills, help them with a CV, self-assessments for personal development.

"With the right tools and advice, you can find that perfect job and learn to flourish both personally and professionally."

RUN, WALK, SWIM, SKIP, RUN UP

AND DOWN... JUST GET MOVING

Irene Quinn (right) is a psychotherapist who specialises in trauma and works closely with Professor Ivor Browne. She explains how the recession can affect our 'fight or flight' impulses and how we can learn to cope with fear and stress and regain our self-esteem.

She says: "Fear and anxiety are vital for giving us messages that we are in danger and we may need to act when life and limb is being threatened - such as when the sabre-tooth tiger was hunting a meal. The adrenaline pumps through the body and we either fight, get the hell out of Dodge or freeze. Trauma exists when we freeze and the person is overwhelmed when the ability to fight or run is absent.

"A recession creates unemployment and poverty, key social determinants of physical and mental health. This can be very traumatic for individuals, families and communities displaying often the same human reactions of distress kicking in in the very same way.

"In our society at the moment, being hunted by bills, mortgages and the terror of being, or in the process of becoming, destitute can be compared to the sabre-tooth tiger. When fear and anxiety become overwhelming the human system must protect itself from the overload of adrenaline - such as the shock of reading a bill - and often moves into despair.

Panic

"To break the isolation of these feelings depends on our ability to move through the despair, to try to become aware of the behaviour, such as isolating ourselves, that follows these feelings and work with the anxiety or panic to break its power.

"To reassess how we regain a sense of meaning and belonging is important for our mental health.

"And how do we do that? For me I use therapy to help to create an understanding of how we are coping and to build skills to be enable us to cope a little better.

"Although there are massive hardships, centring on issues of self-esteem is vital. Self-esteem is a key component that helps us negotiate this world so we can survive it when times are very hard indeed.

"Supporting the person to communicate in a more compassionate way toward themselves, within the family and making links to their community helps to gain perspective and peace. Creating a sense of belonging and community is vital for all our mental health.

"The simplest set of suggestions to build your mental health is possibly the hardest endeavour to maintain and that is exercise.

"Run, walk, swim, skip, run up and down the stairs, whatever. Just get moving. It has an enduring effect on your mental health as it sends good signals and chemicals all through the body that give a sense of well-being: simple but effective."

Veronica has a free 'self-help' CBT resource blog, including downloadable worksheets, at: <http://iveronicawalsh.wordpress.com> To contact Mandy see: www.flourishdevelopment.com, mandy@flourishdevelopment.com Irene Quinn practises at The Institute of Psychosocial Medicine, Glashule, Dun Laoghaire. See www.ipmed.org

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