

HEALTHY MINDS
A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS
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Poverty as a Stressor



The correlation between mental illness and poverty has been known for years by social scientists. Poorer people have more mental illness than those who are better off. Until recently it was not known for certain if poverty made a person more apt to develop mental illness or if mental illness caused people to be poor.

A recent massive study of 34,000 hospitalized patients, lasting for seven years, showed that the economic stressors of poverty, unemployment and lack of affordable housing, usually precede mental illness. Most data typically shows that mental illness is two to nine times more common in lower income communities than in higher ones.

Some of the risk factors of poverty include the inability to get access to appropriate services early on when anxiety, stress and depression over one's lot in life or the ability to pay bills, medications, health care, gasoline or even the most inexpensive groceries. Many homeowners today are facing higher mortgage rates, loss of employment and the subsequent loss of their property which translates to homelessness, improper nourishment, and tremendous family stress.

Poor people also face more challenges from the legal and judicial systems and find it easier to be arrested and then jailed for minor offenses, victimless crimes, or inability to pay child support. Although Americans make up only about 5% of the world's total population they comprise – shockingly - one quarter of the total prisoners in the entire world, yet our crime rate is very high. Of all the states, Kentucky has the highest rate of incarceration in the nation – and in the world. Poor people are afraid of not only the criminals but of the legal system, and this creates stress, anxiety, and decline of mental well-being. All of these stressors lead to self medication and addiction through nicotine, alcohol, illicit drugs, or pharmaceuticals bought on the street or supplied legally by physicians.

Another study, presented in the Journal of Family Practice showed that people with low incomes and no insurance are twice as likely to have psychiatric disorders, including mood disorders, eating disorders, anxiety disorders, and alcohol abuse.

People on fixed incomes cannot afford the rising costs of almost everything and have to do without or find alternatives based on the old concept that a penny saved is a penny earned. I am going to list a few ideas for saving money that you can consider. Please send me your ideas. It is better to find some alternatives than to worry yourself about your fate. Some ideas require a bit more work and energy, but it is a well known fact that any kind of exercise lowers anxiety, as does working towards a solution. Here are my ideas:

-Unsubscribe from that expensive television service. Precious life is meant to be lived, not spent observing electronic images of fictional lives or other people playing sports while you sit on a couch. You will now have free time to pursue some of the other ideas. A mind is a terrible thing to waste.

-Trying walking more and driving less, when you can; make less trips to town, and when there don't sit in your air-conditioner car with the motor running, wasting money and polluting the air. Accelerate gently, use less air-conditioning, and coast more, brake less. This will increase your gas mileage significantly.

-Shop more efficiently, buying in bulk for greater savings, and avoiding costly and less healthy ready to eat foods and deadly junk-foods.

-Take the effort to cook some home-made food from healthy meat and produce. Get the cheaper cuts of meat, and cut down on meat consumption. Buy locally grown produce whenever you can. Even cake mixes are inexpensive. Try your hand at baking bread. It is not hard to do and tastes so much better.

-There is no better exercise than growing a garden. Even a small backyard garden or just a few plants in containers can add many food dollars to your budget. It's a great pastime and a source of pride. If you grow enough you can sell or trade your bounty to neighbors and friends. It is honest work, and now is the time to learn or sharpen gardening skills, as the economy continues to slide down. As transportation prices increase and tractor diesel prices rise, food will have to follow suit.

-Kick the expensive smoking habit. Yes, it is tough to do, but you have to be tougher to escape being a slave to the wealthy tobacco industry because it is such an addictive and lethal drug; just because it is legal doesn't make it any less dangerous. Non-smokers also have less medical problems than smokers, and so you can save money twice.

-Vacation locally. A day at the lake (or several days in a tent) means low gas costs, low lodging costs and lots of benefits like sunbathing, swimming, cooking out, picnicking, hiking, fishing, and other activities.

-Shop at a thrift store. Often you will find very fine and expensive clothing, furniture, cookware, gifts, books, and so forth, at your local store, usually for an excellent value. In many of these stores the profits go to help the needy as well.

-Save money by saving energy: turn the lights off, don't waste water by washing dishes under a running faucet; adjust your thermostat when you leave your house for the day.

TIP OF THE WEEK: Ironically, a day after our mention of the danger of Tasers, a California jury penalized Taser International, Inc. for \$6.2 million for the death of a 40 year old California man who died after police shot him multiple times with the weapon until he stopped moving, succumbing to cardiac arrest. His parents had called police

because their son was acting strangely. This was a tragedy for the parents and the officers involved, who were never informed of the lethal risk of Tasers.