

- The ailing economy can **harm your health.**
- **Chronic worry** hits older people the hardest.
- How can you **control** your anxiety?

Stress

In the still, lonely hours before dawn, Karen Gaebelein sits in her living room chair staring out the window at the dark sky—her thoughts racing, heart pounding. At age 56, Gaebelein, who lives in Broadview Heights, Ohio, is worried about the mortgage on her condo, her shrinking retirement savings, her questionable job future.

Like millions of Americans, she is anxious, stressed by the troubling uncertainties of the faltering economy. And that stress is literally making her sick. Gaebelein, who has been unemployed for a year, has had trouble sleeping.

Why It's Making You Sick

Her blood pressure is high. She has bouts of depression. "I forget to eat some days," says Gaebelein, who managed two offices of a credit union. "But once in a while I get a big bag of greasy fast food and a giant Hershey bar. I know I shouldn't, I know it's bad for me, but I can't help it."

While a certain amount of stress can increase productivity and creativity, too much can be mentally and physically damaging. Not only does stress provoke negative behaviors such as bingeing on junk food, smoking and excessive drinking, it can also lead to ailments ranging from colds and flu to depres-

By
Barbara
Basler



sion, high blood pressure and memory loss.

Stress that persists over the years can exacerbate conditions such as heart disease, hardening of the arteries, autoimmune disease, diabetes and ulcers, experts say. Research indicates stress can also speed the aging process.

"Stress rarely causes disease, but it creates conditions that make the body more vulnerable to disease. And if you're already sick or have a chronic illness, stress can make it worse," says Sheldon Cohen, a psychologist at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. "Its effects ... can be long-lasting."

Stress, he says, "is the perception that you are facing demands that exceed your ability to cope." The demands can be physical—say, if you're being pursued by a robber. Or they can be psychological—worrying about a job or money.

Today's economic meltdown is triggering widespread psychological stress, which feeds on uncertainty and dread. "We feel our control slipping and our lives growing more and more unpredictable," says Cohen. And the mind repeatedly mulls the same questions: What will happen next? How long will it go on? Will it get worse?

Americans of all ages are living with the anxieties that a troubled economy brings. But some of the most stressed people, like Gaebelein, have been laid off in their

last decade of work, with less chance of finding a new job and recouping financial losses.

"Losing your job at 50 or 60 is not good for your health," says William Gallo, a research scientist at Yale University's School of Medicine in New Haven. "There is compelling evidence that no matter who you compare the older job loser to, he or she does worse physically and mentally."

Gallo's studies, which tracked older people who lost their jobs after a plant closing, found not only that they had more symptoms of depression, but also that "their risk of heart attack and

S **tress creates conditions that make the body more vulnerable to disease.**

stroke was more than doubled compared with people who did not lose their jobs."

Gallo says that job loss for people age 50 and older—with its attendant anxiety—should be considered an added risk factor for cardiovascular problems. (When study participants found other jobs, he says, the risk was greatly reduced.)

Another finding: People who fear losing their jobs have more health problems than those who actually lost them, says Sarah A. Burgard, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Michigan. She and her team looked at 3,000 employed people under age 60 participating in two long-term

studies and divided them into those who worried about losing their jobs and those who didn't. They found that over a two-year period people who felt chronically insecure about their jobs reported much worse overall health and were more depressed than those who actually lost their jobs.

"Living with uncertainty, that's extremely damaging to your health," says Burgard.

Why is stress so insidious?

The stress response is an archaic mechanism designed to help primitive man survive a sudden physical threat—an animal attack or a raid by warriors. It's a powerful physiological response meant to kick in briefly while the body prepares to flee or to fight the danger.

But this atavistic system has been dragged into the 21st century, says Louise Hawkley, associate director of the Social Neuroscience Lab at the University of Chicago. "What our brains often interpret as a threat today—a job loss or problems with the mortgage—can trigger the stress response and keep triggering it" until it actually harms the body.

When the brain perceives a threat, potent stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol flood the body, creating a surge of strength. Glucose (sugar) levels spike to provide energy. The heart rate jumps, and blood pressure climbs so that blood moves faster and with greater force to

Proven Strategies For Beating Stress

■ **Socialize.** See friends, relatives, go to club meetings. Stay connected. This is paramount.

■ **Talk, laugh, cry, get angry.** Let it out.

■ **Exercise regularly.** Studies show exercise reduces anxiety, releases tension and spurs the brain to pump out endorphins, chemicals that create a sense of well-being. Try for 30 to 60 minutes three times a week.

■ **Eat a healthy, balanced diet.**

■ **Block stress by losing yourself** in activities you enjoy deeply—reading, playing music, gardening, visiting friends. Add these activities to your daily or weekly schedule. Be disciplined about this.

■ **Get perspective.** Remember past hardships and problems you've overcome.

■ **Live in the moment** through activities you enjoy, and small escapes like movies and TV.

■ **Practice slow, deep breaths.** Shallow, fearful breathing seems to send stress signals to the brain.

■ **Try yoga or meditation.** If you don't enjoy them, don't force yourself—try another activity.





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deliver oxygen to the muscles.

To allow the body to channel all effort toward fleeing or fighting, other hormones suppress systems that don't directly aid those actions, including the immune, digestive, growth and reproduction functions. The body remains in this state of alert until the brain is convinced the threat is over.

If this massive reaction occurs repeatedly, Hawkey says, over time it wreaks havoc on the delicate hormonal responses that regulate the body's various systems.

Elevated hormones, for example, rev up the cardiovascular system, straining the heart and blood vessels and increasing cholesterol and plaque—changes that can lead to hardening of the arteries, stroke and heart attacks.

When chronic stress disturbs the body's correct hormonal settings, other problems can ensue, including colitis and bowel problems, and infections that breach a faulty immune system.

One study, led by Cohen, shows that people living with one of two major "stressors"—unemployment and underemployment—were five times more likely to develop colds than the unstressed.

Still, people can learn to cope, experts say, and that helps mitigate the effects of stress on health.

The first step is to "learn to notice your stress signals," says Rajita Sinha, M.D., director of the Yale Stress Center in New Haven, Conn. Key indicators, she says, include a faster heartbeat, a drop in energy, changes in appetite, teeth grinding, tension in the arms, back or neck, tightness in the stomach, and sleep

problems. "Attend to these signs early," she says, "and find ways to cope that work for you."

The brain is the arbiter of stress, and what sends one person into an anxious funk or even prompts thoughts of suicide hardly affects another. What's key is that the brain can be distracted, calmed by activities that engage and provide enjoyment—such as reading a great mystery, jogging with the dog or playing the trombone.

Dealing with stress "is not about

A crucial strategy for fighting stress, experts say, is to stay connected to friends and relatives.

moving away from the negative, it's about moving toward the positive, doing things that make us happy," says Douglas Mennin, associate professor of psychology at Yale and director of the department's Anxiety and Mood Services. He suggests engaging in activities that turn the mind away from stress, "not just on the weekend" but as a regular routine.

A crucial strategy, experts say, is to stay connected to friends and relatives. Find emotional support. Loneliness is a major stressor that can heighten every other problem.

And remember that many people are resilient and adaptable, Mennin adds.

Karen Gaebelein says she's trying to exercise more and see her friends. She has found satisfaction volunteering in a senior community. "I have not lost hope yet," she says. □

To Learn More

For information and stress management techniques, visit:

- American Institute of Stress at www.stress.org
- American Psychological Association at www.apahelpcenter.org
- Mayo Clinic at www.mayoclinic.com
- Yale Stress Center at yalestress.org