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DOMINGO SATURDAY

■ In our weekly Q&A, the governor of the Mexican state of Chiapas talks about tourism and other issues.

Recession and depression: Support groups are offering help

By his mid-20s, Tony had accrued the kind of wealth many people could retire on. An asset manager who had invested much of his own money in high-risk, high-reward equity, he was buoyed by the stock market's tidal rise.

When the market crashed, Tony did too. He lost his job. His marriage dissolved. He sold his house. He felt, for the first time, a sense of despair.

“It was the sheer speed at which things turned on a dime,” said Tony, who asked that his last name not be used. “It has a tendency to make you feel like, no matter what you do on a day-to-day basis, things are somewhat out of your control.”

At the advice of a friend, Tony joined a support group for people with depression and bipolar disorder. Although he has not been diagnosed with clinical depression, he's one of a growing number of people to seek help since the economy took its 2008 nose dive.

The Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance of Greater Houston, which hosts 60 weekly support groups in the area, has seen the groups swell by more than 200 members in the last year, a 15 percent increase attributable largely to the economy.

“For a lot of folks, this is their first entry into the mental health system,” said the alliance's executive director, Glenn Urbach. “A lot of them are saying, ‘I've never had this before,’ but they're struggling now with income loss or fear of losing their jobs.”

The surge has reached mental health providers throughout Houston, who say recessions historically have correlated with increases in depression. That doesn't mean recessions cause clinical depression, providers say, but they can make the symptoms worse.

“A lot of people are suffering,” said Susan Denyes-Moody, president of the National Alliance on Mental Illness' Metropolitan Houston branch.

“There's chronic depression and there's situational. Some situational will go on so long it becomes chronic. For people who have the chemical imbalance that makes them prone to depression, they'll have it regardless, but financial matters can make it worse,” Denyes-Moody said.

A study commissioned in the fall by the National Alliance on Mental Illness and by Mental Health America found that economic uncertainty was tied to increased reports of mental illness.

The report found that unemployed people were four times as likely as working people to report symptoms of severe mental illness. It also found that those who experienced pay cuts or reduced hours at work were twice as likely to suffer those symptoms as others who had not experienced such changes. And 13 percent of unemployed people reported thoughts of harming themselves, compared with 4 percent of employed people.

“The trends are mapped with what Houston is seeing: a dramatic increase in psychiatric symptoms,” said David Shern, president of Mental Health America.

(cont.) Recession and depression

And untreated depression can lead, in its extreme, to suicide.

“Calls to suicide hot lines are way up, and there's good evidence that suicides do increase during times of economic displacement,” Shern said. “For many people, it's a matter of life or death.”

As with stress alone, economic uncertainty can lead to outbreaks of depression for those prone to the disease. But losing a job can also mean losing health insurance, so people who are already depressed may cut back on doctor visits and even discontinue medication.

Those who haven't been diagnosed may be unwilling to seek expensive treatment. And as government coffers empty, social programs that offer affordable treatment are being scaled back.

“It's a perfect storm,” Shern said.

Urbach, of the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance, worries that people in need may slip through the cracks. Those who haven't been diagnosed with depression before may not recognize the onset of a depressive episode or realize they need help.

“The anxiety takes hold, and they start having catastrophic thoughts: I'm going to lose my house, my family,” Urbach said. “That may be true, but we say let's not dwell on things that haven't happened. Let's not jump from A to Z just yet.”

Support groups like the one Tony joined are one way to keep catastrophic thinking in check. And group members share resources and tips to find affordable treatment.

At Chapelwood United Methodist Church, in the Piney Point area, 30 people arrived for a recent Tuesday night support group.

The group split into three separate sections, one headed by volunteer Bill Rudolf. When Rudolf started as a group leader here, about four years ago, the group drew an average attendance of 10 or 15.

“In the last six months, we always have 20 to 30,” he said.

Group members listed the medications they had tried, the side effects they had suffered, and the trials and triumphs they had seen.

“Hopelessness is paramount in your life,” one member said. “It's like your lifeblood has been sucked out of you.”

“I can't think of anything good about me,” another said.

But they left the group, they said, feeling better.

Tony has taken lessons from his group meetings he thinks he never would have learned without enduring the financial and personal losses of the last year and a half.

“Before, I had pretty large financial goals that I wanted to reach by the time I was 40,” he said. “In hindsight, I should have been happy to already be financially stable. When things are going well, it's encouraging, but you never realize how much you have to lose until things turn.”

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