

Stress Over Debt Taking Toll on Health

By Jeannine Aversa, Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The stress from deepening debt is becoming a major pain in the neck — and the back and the head and the stomach — for millions of Americans.

When people are dealing with mountains of debt, they're much more likely to report health problems, too, according to an Associated Press-AOL Health poll. And not just little stuff; this means ulcers, severe depression, even heart attacks.

Take Edward Driscoll, 38, of Braintree, Mass. He blames debt — \$10,000 worth — for contributing to his ulcers and his wife Kimberly's panic attacks. "Just worrying, worrying, worrying, you know, where the next payment of this is going to come from," he says.

Although most people appear to be managing their debts all right, perhaps 10 million to 16 million are "suffering terribly due to their debts, and their health is likely to be negatively impacted," says Paul J. Lavrakas, a research psychologist and AP consultant who analyzed the results of the survey. Those are people who reported high levels of debt stress and suffered from at least three stress-related illnesses, he says.

That finding is supported by medical research that has linked chronic stress to a wide range of ailments.

And the current tough economic times and rising costs of living seem to be leading to increasing debt stress, 14% higher this year than in 2004, according to an index tied to the AP-AOL survey. Among the people reporting high debt stress in the new poll:

- 27% had ulcers or digestive tract problems, compared with 8% of those with low levels of debt stress.
- 44% had migraines or other headaches, compared with 15%.
- 29% suffered severe anxiety, compared with 4%.
- 23% had severe depression, compared with 4%.
- 6% reported heart attacks, double the rate for those with low debt stress.
- More than half, 51%, had muscle tension, including pain in the lower back. That compared with 31% of those with low levels of debt stress.

People who reported high stress also were much more likely to have trouble concentrating and sleeping and were more prone to getting upset for no good reason.

When their construction business went under four years ago, Pamela Crouch, 61, and her husband, who had retired from General Motors, found themselves struggling under IOUs totaling \$30,000.

"We just kind of felt desperate. We just really didn't have enough to live on to pay what we had to pay," recalls Crouch of Eaton, Ind. She remembers having trouble sleeping and concentrating.

"We ended up paying a lot of our bills just on the credit card," says Crouch, a medical assistant in a nursing home. "We were stressed and depressed. ... It was really rough."

Their son, a manager of a construction supply company, recently helped them out with their debt problems. "Things are doing much better," she says. "It made a world of difference in how we feel."

It isn't known for certain whether such stress is causing health problems, says Lavrakas, who while at Ohio State University in the late 1990s helped to develop an index to measure the extent to which people are stressed from financial debts.

But medical research suggests that most of the symptoms reported in this poll are indeed typical of chronic stress. The body reacts with a "fight-or-flight" response, releasing adrenaline and the stress hormone cortisol. That helps you react fast in an emergency, but if the body stays in this high gear too long, those chemicals can wreak physical havoc in numerous systems — everything from a rise in blood pressure and heart rate to problems with memory, mood, digestion, even the immune system.

And no, stress doesn't cause stomach ulcers — most are caused by bacteria — but stress can worsen the pain.

Regardless of the health implications, Americans are taking on more debt as tough economic times — slowing economic activity, job losses, soaring energy and food prices, slumping home values and record home foreclosures — strain many people's budgets.

Revolving consumer debt, almost all from credit cards, now totals \$957 billion, compared with \$800 billion in 2004, according to the Federal Reserve.

Average car loans are up, too, to \$27,397, from \$24,888 four years ago. Home mortgages total \$10.5 trillion, compared with \$7.8 trillion in 2004.

If that's not enough to rattle you, consider this. The share of households' after-tax income that goes to serving financial obligations was nearly 20% in 2007, up from 18.5% in 2004, said Scott Hoyt, senior director of consumer economics at Moody's Economy.com.

No wonder people are feeling stressed. So, why do they let debt spiral out of control?

A significant life crisis like a major health problem or the loss of a job drives many people into debt. Others build up bills "trying to keep up with the Joneses" — according to Patricia Drentea, associate professor of sociology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, who studies debt and stress.

For the middle class and beyond, it could be a push for a bigger house, an SUV, high-tech TVs, computers and other electronic gadgets, gym memberships, nicer clothes and restaurants. The list goes on and on.

Indeed, the survey found that upwardly mobile, middle-class families were among those who had the most debt stress. Others were women, couples with small children, low-income working families, Democrats and those who graduated high school but haven't taken college courses.

Those least likely to be stressed from debt include men, retirees, empty nesters, college graduates and Republicans.

The AP-AOL Health poll involved telephone interviews with 1,002 adults from all states except Alaska and Hawaii and was conducted from March 24 to April 3 by Abt SRBI Inc. The margin of sampling error was plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

Cynthia Roberts, 36, of Tawas City, Mich., is "slowly crawling out of the hole that I've been buried in for four years." At that time, she lost her job as a convenience store manager as she battled health problems. She eventually lost her home to foreclosure.

These days, Roberts, a mother of four, the oldest in the Army, makes a living through a series of odd jobs — hauling metal to the scrap yard, selling firewood, mowing lawns and cleaning houses. She's now making payments on utility bills and on her car. But not her credit card, where hundreds of dollars in charges are several years old.

At the height of her financial troubles, "I couldn't function," she remembers. "I'm surprised I'm not in a white straitjacket in a nut house. It was that bad. I had to go for counseling because I was freaking out."

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