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Don't let this crisis hurt your health

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My View

With the turbulent state of the economy today, Floridians are facing major life changes that have the potential to put their health and well-being at risk.

Some people grapple with a constant fear of unemployment and the resulting pitfalls of reduced income and benefits coverage. Others feel threatened by the declining real-estate market and increasing home foreclosures. Many consumers suffer hardest at the gas pump and grocery stores, as inflated prices cause jaw-dropping sticker shock. All of these factors combined are leading many citizens to feel overwhelmed, stressed and out of control.

Stress levels caused by job and financial insecurity can become harmful to the body and mind. The Mayo Clinic lists some notable physical effects of stress to be headaches, chest pain, high blood pressure, muscle aches, upset stomach, fatigue and problems sleeping. Stress can also affect your thoughts and feelings through anxiety, increased worrying, anger, mood swings, forgetfulness and burnout. As money becomes less available and stress levels rise, it is even possible for these symptoms to spiral into mental health crisis, clinical depression, alcohol and/or substance use, and thoughts of suicide.

With 2,410 Floridians having died by suicide in 2006, suicide is clearly a public health threat. In Florida, the number of suicides is much higher than the HIV death rate (1,746) and nearly double the number of homicides (1,211). Alarmingly, the public is rarely informed on the prevalence of suicide unless it involves a prominent societal figure. Although suicide deaths remain a societal epidemic, many mental-health professionals are reporting a shift in the reasons behind suicidal ideation to be more focused on financial anxiety than in years past.

One of the highest risk factors for suicide is a feeling of hopelessness, as if there is no way out and no solution in sight. According to the American Association of Suicidology, other warning signs include: uncontrolled anger; acting reckless or engaging in risky behaviors; increased alcohol or drug use; withdrawing from family, friends or society; anxiety, agitation, being unable to sleep or sleeping all the time; dramatic mood changes or feeling no purpose in life. If you or someone you know is exhibiting these warning signs, call your doctor immediately or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK to speak with a confidential, trained counselor 24 hours a day.

The good news is that there are treatment options available, and you don't have to suffer in silence. Many who have sought treatment report a drastic improvement in their life and are thankful that they reached out for help.

In the spring of 2007 the Statewide Office of Suicide Prevention was established to develop suicide prevention strategies, manage statewide initiatives, create policy and serve as a clearinghouse of information for the general public. For a list of resources in your area visit www.HelpPromoteHope.com and click on the Florida resources map, listed under "Resources." There is help and hope.