

WORRIED SICK

By VIRGINIA BACKAITIS

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Three shots of vodka topped off with Red Bull isn't what most people think of when they hear the term Power Lunch, but that's what Al, a newly unemployed investment banker, has been calling his midday meal this week. The combination of potent libations picks him up and mellows him out, he says.

"I need to sound social, not desperate, when I make my afternoon networking calls looking for job leads," he says.

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Al knows drinking and dialing is hardly a job search technique touted by career coaches, but he's given himself permission to use it for now.

"These aren't ordinary times," he explains. He points out that Lehman Brothers had been in business since before the Civil War, and that Bear Stearns survived the Great Depression.

"Now they're both gone," he says. "My livelihood was this industry and now it's disappeared. Can you blame me for taking a little comfort while I do what I need to get done in a day?"

While there are any number of answers therapists might offer to Al's question, many we spoke to many who agreed on one thing: Al's not alone in his feelings.

"Everybody is very anxious and many people are panicked," says psychologist Jeffrey Kleinberg, who as president-elect of the American Group Psychotherapy Association has a wide-angle view of how the current financial crisis is affecting individuals.

And you don't have to have lost your job to feel job-loss stress, with the city projected to lose as many as 165,000 jobs in the next two years, according to Comptroller Bill Thompson. As if that's not reason enough to fret, Kleinberg and other New York therapists say that for many this current crisis is dredging up memories and feelings related to the trauma of 9/11.

"That was an attack on our financial system; this is the collapse of our financial system," says Kleinberg. "Anxiety feeds on anxiety. The feelings of security that many once had have now been destroyed."

As a result, helping professionals say they're seeing an increase in problem use of alcohol and drugs, risky sexual behavior, overeating, depression, and smoking - and many fear they're observing just the first edge of this trend.

"I can see the panic in people's eyes on the street," says psychotherapist and radio show host Armand DiMele. "And when you're responding from panic your chemistry demands an immediate solution."

A still-employed Wall Street banker whom we'll call Pete (because he doesn't want his real name used) understands what DiMele is talking about. Pete's the kind of guy who would normally wait out a headache rather than take an aspirin, yet earlier this month he lifted "a few" Xanax from his mother's medicine cabinet.

"There were 20 left in the bottle and the prescription's almost a year old," he explains. "There's no way she's going to use them all before it expires."

Still, he's so uncomfortable with what he did that even with an alias he was initially reluctant to be quoted in this article.

"Look, I couldn't sleep," he said. "The minute I'd get in the bed the what-ifs would begin to play in my head, and it's not like if I get laid off I'll have much of a cushion to land on. My portfolio's practically worthless."

Pete's hardly the only New Yorker who's having trouble sleeping. Career Coach Deborah Brown-Volkman says many of her clients report staying up all night worrying.

"They don't eat, they don't sleep," she says, "Those who are still working are afraid to leave the office because they might miss something."

Of course, people react to stress in different ways. Psychotherapist Tom Kersting, who works with many Wall Streeters, has a few clients who were successful dieters until recently - now they come home from work rattled by stress and climb into bed with a container of ice cream.

"They eat the whole thing," Kersting says. Needless to say, they wake up the next day not only with problems around job security and weight, but a whole lot of guilt and self-loathing.

Kersting points out that stressors such as job loss can ignite primitive, physiological responses.

"Imagine how a dinosaur might react if it suddenly found itself in a land where prospects for food and procreation were few," he says. "Your blood pressure rises, your vision increases, your heart starts to pound faster. There's an urgent demand for release."

While Kersting's clients reach for food, psychotherapist Jonathan Alpert has some clients who seek stress relief in other ways; in his practice risky sexual conduct is near the top of the list. Why the risky conduct?

"Because sex [within a committed relationship] and stress are about as compatible as Joe Biden and Sarah Palin," says Alpert, who says some of his married clients are visiting strip clubs and massage parlors and using escort services either for the very first time or far more often than usual.

Sudhir Venkatesh, a Columbia sociology professor who's studied sex workers, has noted that business typically booms for those servicing high-end clients during a downturn. The women report that clients come for "a mix of escape and encouragement," he wrote last month on Slate.com.

What's the problem with getting a little "release" on the side? Inquiring minds might want to consult Eliot Spitzer.

For those who are prone toward, suffering from or recovering from substance abuse, fears of job loss and financial insecurity are an "extra-loaded trigger," says Steve Pasierb of the Partnership for a Drug Free America.

"This is the moment when some drinkers become problem-drinkers, when some problem-drinkers become super-problem drinkers, and when casual drug use can turn to addiction," he says.

Part of the problem, say mental health experts, is that economic-stress victims often have few outlets for venting their worries. Talking to a spouse can backfire, given that the very things dogging someone afraid of losing a job are likely to instill fear in their significant other. And commiserating with co-workers may not be much better, given that they're not only likely to suffer from the same fears, but be carriers of worrisome company or industry gossip.

For these reasons and others, it's not a big surprise that there's been a 21 percent increase in calls into employee assistance programs, and a 75% increase in calls into New York's Hopeline this year. These figures have a silver lining, though - they're proof that at least some of those in need of help are reaching out for it, which, professionals say, is key at junctures like this.

At the end of the day, the deal is this: if you've lost your job, or are afraid you're going to lose it, nothing you drink, smoke, snort, swallow, or sleep with is going to change that. And if you're struggling, there is help available and asking for it does not mean that you're weak or mentally ill.

"These are not sick people," Kleinberg says about those who may be having trouble handling these unprecedented levels of widespread anxiety. In fact, getting support at a time like this may be what the healthiest among us choose to do.

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