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Psychologists offer tips to battle tax-time stress

Advertiser Staff

With the looming IRS tax deadline on April 17, more Americans are experiencing financial stressors and may be dealing with them in unhealthy ways, according to the American Psychological Association.

Stress related to tax deadlines can increase reliance on the unhealthy behaviors many people already use to cope with everyday stressors related to money, work, personal and family health matters, and raising children. The APA warns that increased reliance on unhealthy behaviors to manage stress can lead to long-term, serious health problems.

"People who cope with stress in unhealthy ways may alleviate symptoms of stress in the short term but end up creating significant personal health problems over time, and, ironically, more stress," says Dr. Brad Klontz, of the Hawai'i Psychological Association, the local chapter of the APA.

"It's important that people identify times of the year, such as tax season, that may cause increased stress in their lives and take a proactive approach to stress management by creating opportunities to engage in healthier coping behaviors," Klontz said.

A 2006 APA survey found that money is the top source of stress for adults. Nearly 60 percent of people attribute their stress to money and work, interrelated issues that are emphasized for many during the tax-filing process. The survey also found that, overall, people are engaging in unhealthy behaviors, such as eating to alleviate stress, making poor diet choices, smoking, drinking and being inactive to manage financial and other life stressors.

The Hawaii Psychological Association offers these strategies for managing financial stress:

Define stress — Everyone experiences stress differently. How do you know when you are stressed? Does that experience change during tax filing season or when making financial decisions?

Identify money stressors — What events or situations trigger stressful feelings? Are they related to meeting tax deadlines, paying bills, money decisions, financial responsibilities at work or home? Or something else?

Recognize how you deal with financial stress — Some people deal with stress by using unhealthy behaviors such as smoking, drinking or abusing food. Determine if you are using those types of unhealthy behaviors to cope with finance related stress. Is this a behavior you rely on year-round, or is it specific to tax filing deadlines or other money decisions? Do you turn to unhealthy financial behaviors such as overspending, misuse of credit cards, neglecting bills or constantly borrowing money in an effort to deal with financial stressors?

Understand what money means to you — Money is often symbolic of emotional issues that may seem unrelated at first to your personal finances. What does money represent to you? How might that increase your stress?

Find healthy ways to manage stress — Consider healthy, stress-reducing activities — taking a short walk, exercising, or talking things out with friends or family. Try to develop these types of healthy stress management behaviors so that when you're in a financial crisis, you'll have healthy strategies available to help you reduce stress. Keep in mind, unhealthy behaviors develop over the course of time and can be difficult to change. Don't take on too much at one time. Focus on changing only one behavior at a time.

Ask for professional support — Accepting help from friends and family who care about you and will listen to you about your financial challenges can improve your ability to manage stress. Financial planners are also available to help you take control over your money situation. If you continue to be overwhelmed by financial stress, you may want to talk with a psychologist

who can help you address the emotions behind your money behaviors, manage stress and change unhealthy behaviors.

For a referral, call HPA at 521-8995, and for more tips or information, see the HPA Web site at www.hawaiipsych.org .

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