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Shrinking wallet, expanding waistline

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Lean times and lean bodies? Not at all. The stress from a nose-diving economy gives rise to the urge to eat. "When you feel deprived -- or potentially deprived -- one of the ways to feel safe and secure is to feed yourself," says Diane Barth, a Manhattan-based clinical social worker with a specialty in eating disorders. "From the beginning of time, we've done this: used food to comfort ourselves."

According to a recent survey by the American Psychological Association, eight of 10 Americans say the chilling economic climate is causing them stress.

Most of those surveyed said they overeat or eat unhealthy foods to manage their stress. (Perhaps telling is that while many other industries are suffering, national candy sales are up 2.2 percent in the past year, according to the National Confectioners Association.)

"What we need to look for are solutions that match our problems. But so often we get our arrows crossed," says Cynthia Bulik, professor of eating disorders at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "If you feel anxious, meditation and relaxation are solutions, not food," she says. "Food is the solution for hunger."

When we use food to fight stress, we eventually end up with even more stress. In other words, we compound our problems.

"Food gives us immediate gratification," says Ms. Bulik, who is also the director of the UNC Eating Disorders Program. "Food is in the here and now, and it creates a temporary good feeling."

Once that temporary good feeling passes -- essentially when the ice cream or candy is gone -- feelings of guilt and anxiety creep back, sometimes manifold.

Self-medicating by overeating -- or in some cases, drinking too much or overspending -- can cause "a whole host of secondary problems," says Brad Klontz, a psychologist in Kapaeha, Hawaii.

"These behaviors can lead to health problems, relationship conflicts, decreased work productivity, and can compound our financial problems," Mr.

Klontz says.

For people with chronic eating disorders, the problems arguably are even graver during tough economic times.

"Now they have guilt not only about their eating disorder, but also about literally biting into their family's food budget," Ms. Bulik says.

The ways to save money in this economy -- such as buying in bulk at discount big-box and grocery stores -- run contrary to the type of lifestyle and purchasing habits people with eating disorders often need to adopt: buying only what is needed and favoring portion-sized packages.

Bulk buying can lead to bulk eating, especially if there are 30 granola bars and 24 muffins in each package.

Ms. Bulik hopes there is a silver lining in this messy combination of stress, bad finances and overeating.

"Maybe this will be yet another motivation for recovery," Ms. Bulik says. "Because now it's not just impacting your health, but it's impacting your pocketbook, too."

For the general population, she recommends that people find something over which they can gain control, such as some portion of their personal finances.

"Control is a great fix for anxiety," Ms. Bulik says. "Find something you can get on top of."

Mr. Klontz recommends allowing enough time to recharge mental batteries as a means of fighting anxiety. "Build in some healthy stress-management activities such as going for a walk, taking in a nice sunset or spending more time with supportive family and friends," he says.

Ms. Barth agrees that panicking should be avoided, but anxiety itself shouldn't be fought. "Anxiety is totally appropriate at a time like this, but instead of looking for quick fixes, I wish we could just sit still for a moment and observe our feelings and see what they tell us," she says.

She calls for a realization that, along with the anxiety of financial markets, personal anxiety, too, will pass. Anxiety, whether on financial markets or in the mind, comes and goes like the ebb and flow of ocean waves.

"I wish we could learn to ride the wave," she says.