



The WCPA News

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When the Economy Hits Home: Ten Suggestions for Helping Our Schools Through the Downturn

By Mary Saggau, LCSW and Amy Maus, LCSW

No doubt, these are hard times for many of us. In our personal lives, we have friends, neighbors, and family members who have lost jobs, lost homes, and/or struggle with their small businesses. We ourselves may be wondering about our own job statuses next school year. These personal worries and stresses can become very difficult to bear, and affect our outlooks, our personalities, our behaviors, and even our health.

All of this is compounded, of course, by professional concerns. We are professionals in the human services – teachers, principals, administrators, and counselors. As such, our jobs entail serving others. By necessity, this involves empathy and giving of oneself. How do we continue to give, when our own worries are sometimes so overwhelming? How do we continue to teach or lead when our minds keep wondering back to our own personal concerns?

Our schools certainly continue to depend upon us for the jobs we do. As a school experiences a budget crisis, staff layoffs, and/or families in turmoil over lost jobs, the students and families of that school rely ever more upon the kindness, availability, and professionalism of the school's faculty and staff. Our school's families are experiencing much of what we are experiencing. They watch the same news and have lost similar percentages of their savings and investments. They, too, are worried about their jobs.

Of course, principals and administrators have an additional layer of concern, as they try to meet the needs of their faculties and staff members. Budget time, during an economic downturn, is often a time for losing sleep, dreading discussions of layoffs, and enormous stress and worry over it all. What will be the state of the school next year? The staffing? The enrollment? Administrators facing these battles are not alone. Indeed, these days, they are often in quite good company.

Below are ten suggestions for school professionals facing these issues. While there is, of course, no magic wand that fixes all problems, practicing good self-care and communication during these challenges can go a long way toward helping us retain the feelings of professionalism, helpfulness, and order in our lives.

1. Maintain appropriate boundaries – it's more critical than ever. Pay attention to boundaries with your staff and faculty, with your students and their families, and the boundaries you encourage parents to use with their children. For example, students experiencing chaos and anxiety generated by financial upheaval at home are likely to act out behaviorally in school. Maintaining routine order and discipline is more important than ever in such times. It provides the structure and predictability that such students need and helps to reduce their anxiety. Similarly, parents may push previously established boundaries. School issues such as attendance may seem unimportant to families struggling with survival. Nevertheless, maintaining consistency is better for everyone in the long run.

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

In the lead article, Mary Saggau and Amy Maus give suggestions on helping children and schools to remain healthy during these difficult times. We also address this issue with parents in our For Parents Only piece. However, how do we, the adults or professionals, remain strong during economic times that are affecting all of us in some way? If we're administrators, we worry about being able to create a viable budget. We agonize over having to tell teachers with families that we can't offer them a contract for the following year. If we're teachers or staff, we are deeply concerned about our jobs and, if not ours, the ongoing employment of other members of our families. We worry about when the tide will turn. How long will this go on? If I'm surviving now, will I continue to be able to survive if the situation becomes worse?

I can't imagine that there is anyone who is aware of today's economic situation that isn't apprehensive. For me, the question is how do I handle these concerns or anxieties. What gives me any sense of calm, when I see the future being questionable and I don't know that I have the answers to resolve problems that I don't know will exist in the next six months or a year? One of the answers may be found in a statement made to me by a client with whom I recently saw in my office. He said that given all the chaos that was going on in his life, he felt incredibly calm within himself. When I asked where this sense of peace was coming from, he responded that he knew he was where he should be and he was doing the work that he should be doing. He knew that his work was meaningful and that it was what was going on in the present day that counted.

For many of us, this economy is going to demand a change in priorities. Where, in the past, vacations, a new home, or luxury items may have been the focus for us and our families, now our values may seem very different. Out of necessity, we may have to lead simpler lives. We may begin to realize that what is of real value is well within our reach. We generally don't have to go far to find family, treasured friends, our faith, our community. What is of value is right here. We just need to be present to it.

During a very difficult time in my life, a number of years ago, I remember coming to the realization that no matter what could happen to me that was out of my control, I still had my thoughts, my energy, my determination and my spirit. These were parts of me that no one could ever take away from me. What I realized was whatever those values that made me who I was would always remain with me. Maybe this is the time to look more closely at who we really are. Maybe we need to become more aware of those values and characteristics that define us. Maybe we need to be more present to the gifts that surround us. Maybe my client had it right – "I am doing what I need to be doing, I am where I need to be right now."

- *Mary*

Our Philosophy

We believe that individuals and systems:

- Are capable of permanent change
- Function best with clearly defined authority that stems from a family systems hierarchy
- Are accountable for both positive and negative aspects of behavior
- Achieve success by conscious choices that lead to strength and development of personal responsibility
- Control their environment by establishing boundaries that are consistent with their values

WCPA promotes change and growth by:

- Helping to establish order within the environment
- Meeting consistently in a collaborative relationship to achieve identified goals
- Helping to identify and process significant issues
- Aiding in resolving issues as they arise

The result for the system or individual is the development of a strong sense of identity and boundaries that allows for the achievement of goals.

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2. This is a good time to look at your core values. We've gotten too focused on materialism over the last few decades and this crisis can actually be an opportunity to return to healthier values. This is a good time to teach children to sacrifice and to learn that they will get their needs met, but will not always get what they want. It may also be a good time to teach the importance of sharing and the value of giving. In addition, teachers can be encouraged to promote activities with fewer costs, while maintaining excellence in education.

3. Look at the positive and appreciate what is going well. Our mood at the end of the day often depends on whether we were "derailed" by a challenging experience, or were able to maintain an upbeat attitude. Comment on positive things within your school, with your students and with your job. You'll be surprised at how much good there is in each day. Teachers can incorporate "Attitude of Gratitude" activities in order to pass this habit and the optimism it brings on to their students.

4. Honesty is the best policy. This especially applies to administrators who are dealing with budget concerns ranging from personnel reduction, to increased class sizes, to decreased supplies for activities. Keep staff up-to-date on matters that will affect them as much as possible, and if you don't know the answer to a particular question, say so. In these uncertain times, knowing where one stands helps to reduce anxiety. Use the same approach when responding to questions that students ask. Make sure to keep in mind, however, that financial matters are really adult concerns. Keep your answers simple and age appropriate. Children become anxious when given information that is over their heads, or about which they can do nothing.

5. Do something you enjoy each day. Make a list of things that you really enjoy doing. (You'll be surprised at how many you can identify that are virtually cost-free!) Keep the list handy and commit to "giving" yourself at least one item a day. Just knowing that you have something pleasurable to look forward to can make such a difference.

6. Connect with your own support system. Make sure to talk regularly with a loving friend or relative. They too feel the financial pinch or anxiety of what is happening. Knowing that they have the same concerns tends to lessen ours. Talk to a trusted clergy member to find support on a spiritual level. Joining a support group or prayer group may provide additional support as well. If you continue to have difficulty managing your stress, consulting a therapist may shed new light on how to deal with the uncertainty of today's financial world.

7. Don't neglect self-care. In times of stress, we often reduce our self-care, when what's really needed is vigilance in our good habits and an "extra shot" of nurturing. Make sure to get enough sleep and to eat well. A regular exercise program will significantly decrease stress. Though alcohol and caffeine seem to help in the short run, reducing intake of these substances actually helps reduce stress in the long run. In addition, know that being under stress takes its toll; be gentle with yourself and expect a bit less of both yourself and others during difficult times. And if you're feeling below par physically, a trip to the doctor is certainly recommended.

8. Work at letting go of those things that are out of your control. It often helps to make a written list of those things that are within our control and of those things over which we have no control. It's amazing how much time we all spend worrying about things about which we can do nothing. Remind yourself regularly that there is nothing you can do about the stock market, economy at large, or even a spouse's possible job loss. Keep pushing those things out of your mind and work at changing the things that are actually within your control.

9. Keep your options open. If you know that you face possible school closure or job elimination, don't wait for the final word in order to consider your options. Get your resume up-to-date and put feelers out with people that you trust about possible opportunities. Being proactive and creating options for yourself will give you a sense of control in a time when loss of control seems to have become the norm.

10. Remember that our economy really will stabilize. Maybe it will look different. There may be a new "normal," but things will settle down. Necessity is the mother of invention and new, good things will come from this time. Try to stay focused on the current 24-hour period and know that this is not the end.

If you, or someone you know, would benefit from the support of school consultation or therapy at this time, please feel free to call our office at (314) 275-8599. We will work with you to find the therapist or consultant that best fits your needs.



For Parents Only

When the Economic Crisis Hits Your Family: Tips for Helping Your Children

Today's economic world is scary and uncertain. We're afraid to turn on the television for fear of hearing of another drop in the stock market, or of yet another business failure. If we haven't lost our jobs, we certainly know of others who are unemployed, or are concerned about pay freezes or reductions in hours. A sense of anxiety pervades the adult world that wasn't evident twelve months ago.

Our children are aware of the financial downturn as well. Even younger children *feel* the sense of anxiety that goes along with the current economic crisis. Older children, to varying degrees, are knowledgeable about what's going on in the world economy. How can we protect our children from anxiety over this crisis? What should we tell them? Are there ways that the economic crisis can teach them valuable lessons? Some tips to consider:

- It is important that your children know they are safe and secure. Serious financial matters should not be discussed in the presence of children: financial concerns are *adult* concerns. If, for example, a job loss, school change or relocation is imminent, the topic should be discussed with your children only after a decision has been made, and a clear plan for going forward has been identified.
- If significant changes are necessary, *do* discuss them thoroughly with your children. Listen. Provide ample opportunities for your children to talk about their thoughts and feelings and let them know you will always be there for them. As necessary changes occur, know that maintaining consistency in other areas provides a sense of security and reduces anxiety.
- Let your children know that opportunities come from problems. Talk about changes that you're making in terms of both the problems and the new opportunities created by doing things differently. This is a valuable life skill that will serve your children in good stead in times to come.
- Maintain an even keel. Though you may be stressed by what's going on, it's important for your children that you find effective ways to deal with your anxiety. This means being connected to your support system and practicing good self-care. Stick to the basics and make sure that you eat right, get plenty of sleep and exercise regularly. Your children will cope better if you can assume a reassuring, life-as-usual stance for them.
- Use this challenging time to get back to your core values. Talk to your children about what's really important in life. Focus on family activities like potluck dinners with extended family members, picnics and bike rides. This crisis can be an opportunity for your children to learn that they can go without many material things and be perfectly happy.
- This is a good time for your children to learn how to sacrifice and to experience the value of giving. Talk to them about what is going on in the lives of others. Perhaps there is a family in the neighborhood or in your church who is experiencing severe hardship. Ask your children what they think they can do to help and then support them in doing so.

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- Work together as a family. Know that the current crisis won't go on forever and that you will get through this. Focus on the positive with gratitude for what you have and teach your children to do the same.

Mary Saggau is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. She provides individual, couples and family therapy, particularly specializing in working with middle school through adult aged clients and their families on issues surrounding school motivation, depression, anxiety, parenting skills, crisis management and abuse. She can be reached at the WCPA office.

Three Upcoming Opportunities for Parents and Families:

* Understanding Asperger Syndrome:

“Why Does My Child Do That?” and What Parents Can Do to Help

Parents and educators are often perplexed by the behaviors associated with Asperger Syndrome. Intervention efforts can be hampered by the confusion associated with a limited understanding of the problem. Once you are able to explain and understand the behavior that your child is exhibiting, you can intervene appropriately. This seminar will focus on how understanding the characteristics of Asperger Syndrome can lead to effective intervention and improved relationships.

Parents, relatives, and others involved in caring for a child having Asperger Syndrome are invited. Teachers and school administrators will also find this information useful. Presentation will be held at the WCPA office. The presenter is Dr. Jon C. Williams, who specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of Asperger Syndrome.

DATE: Saturday, May 23, 2009 9:30 a.m. - 11:00 a.m. REGISTRATION FEE: \$15 per person.

Please contact Jon Williams at the WCPA office for more information or to register.

* Children in Transition Support Group

This group will be offered to children who are currently beginning 2nd through 6th grade, who have parents that are separated, divorcing or already divorced. This group will discuss topics such as: Why parents marry and divorce, children's perception of household changes, custody and visitation, simple legal terms, step-parents, and understanding happy marriages.

Children in Transition runs 10 consecutive weeks. The cost for participation is \$30.00 per session, with a ten week commitment. Class size is limited.

Please contact Jennifer Bannister at the WCPA office for more information or to schedule.

* WCPA Social Skills Group - Starting in May

WCPA is starting a Social Skills Group for elementary school children. Many studies have shown that social skills can and should be taught to those children who are struggling. Children who are shy can become more outgoing, aggressive children can learn self-control and compromise, while those who tend to be social isolates can be taught how to make friends. Our small group will provide not only the opportunity for additional learning experiences, but also a chance for children to belong, express themselves and benefit from the support of group members.

The group will start in May. It will meet every Tuesday for six weeks. Some topics covered will be:

- Communicating (verbal and non-verbal)
- Being a part of a group and making friends
- Expressing your feelings
- Caring about yourself and others
- Problem solving

The “S” Word: Effectively Preventing Suicide Among Our Students

Amy V. Maus, MSW, LCSW

Suicide. It’s a word that no one wants to say and no one wants to think about. Particularly when we consider our students and the other young people in our lives, the thought of them feeling or acting in suicidal ways is almost unimaginable. Not only do we avoid the topic ourselves, but also we certainly avoid the word and the topic with our students. The fear seems to be, if we think about it, talk about it, educate about it, it might happen. And so we avoid it altogether.

And yet it continues to happen, every year. Young people do attempt and complete suicide. National statistics, the latest available being from 2004, tell us that suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death among young people ages 10-14, after only accidents and cancer. For our 15-19 year olds, it is also ranked 3rd, but behind accidents and homicide. And to be realistic, we have to wonder if these numbers are perhaps underreported, due to the stigma of suicide and families’ intense wishes to see the cause of death listed differently. Certainly, we in the St. Louis community have seen our share of this type of loss.

Not all steps to prevent suicide have to be performed by medical or mental health professionals. Educators and school professionals can take the following steps to prevent suicide among their students: 1) Know the facts about suicide and the risk to young people 2) Watch for the warning signs of a student at-risk for suicidal behavior 3) Don’t avoid the issue, if you fear a student is at-risk, and 4) Respond appropriately, once you know a risk exists. Each of these issues is explored below.

Educators should know the facts about youth suicide. As stated above, suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death among both 10-14 and 15-19 year olds. In fact, adolescents and those over the age of sixty have the highest risk, by age. Within our youth, girls more often attempt suicide, (nationwide, over 200 attempts per completed suicide,) while our boys are more likely to complete suicide. This is due to boys’ use of more lethal methods, such as guns and hanging, as opposed girls’ frequent use of less lethal methods, like pills and cutting their wrists. Be aware that a suicide attempt may happen as a person’s depression seems to be lifting, because of the person’s increased energy levels and ability to plan, organize, and follow through.

Educators can watch for the warning signs of a student who is at-risk. It is a MYTH that students who talk about suicide only want attention, and are not really suicidal. 80% of those who complete suicide communicate their intention to do so beforehand. We have to listen to these communications and take them seriously, even among our younger students. Depression, a family history of suicide attempts or completed suicides, and previous suicide attempts are all risk factors for youth suicide. Other risk factors include: substance use, (50% of all persons completing suicide die with alcohol in their system,) hopelessness, lack of social/familial support, trouble sleeping/insomnia, and a life crisis, such as a rejection by a boyfriend, girlfriend or by one’s friendship group. Of course, depressed youth often seem irritable, rather than sad or down. When a student has seemed depressed or irritable, has poor family support, and seems tearful, hopeless, and perhaps in social crisis, we should keep our eyes and ears open for the possibility of suicidal thinking instead of assuming it’s just “kid stuff.”

We should not avoid the issue, if we fear a student is at-risk. It is another myth that asking depressed people about whether they are having thoughts of harming themselves will somehow “push them over the edge.” Pretending that this risk does not exist, as we talk with a student who is sad, depressed, or in crisis, does not take the risk away. Asking about suicidal thoughts does not create them in a student who is not already suicidal. Many classroom teachers feel untrained and ill-suited for these conversations, and so respond best by immediately sharing their concerns with the school counselor, learning consultant, or principal. Principals and learning consultants, though not counselors, may find themselves in the position of being the best suited person in the building to respond to a student during a crisis.

We must respond appropriately, once we have concerns that a risk exists. The law is clear. We as human service professionals are not expected to have perfect judgment about the future; we cannot know in advance what a student will or won’t do. However, we are expected to act in a way considered reasonable and prudent in our professions. We know that about 1/3 of those persons thinking about suicide will at some point develop a plan; about ¾ of those with a plan will eventually make an attempt. And so we must act on the knowledge that a student is contemplating suicide, no matter how casual their contemplations. We must take their crisis, severe depression, and/or suicidal talk seriously. We should ask if they have a plan to harm themselves. We should never, ever, leave a possibly suicidal student alone. We must call the student’s parents and request a meeting for that day (no, next Tuesday is not OK.) We can and should insist on a professional evaluation by a qualified medical or mental health professional and then insist on communicating with that professional about our concerns. We cannot keep a suicide risk secret from the classroom teacher out of a misplaced respect for confidentiality, as the teacher is our front-line for safety. Lastly, we should document carefully our response to any student we deem at-risk.

Our students and their families are counting upon us to respond with courage and professionalism to this issue. Suicide can no longer be the “s” word that we avoid and deny. Educators can and should be powerful agents in preventing youth suicide.