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So long, stress

In a bleak economy, people are feeling as stressed as their wallets

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By [Alexia Elejalde-Ruiz](#)
RedEye

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After Chris Noble injured his back two years ago helping to unload a freight truck at the electronics store where he worked, the former college track athlete suffered docked wages, chronic back pain—and

overwhelming stress.

Earning two-thirds his former salary through workman's compensation checks that didn't always come when they were supposed to, the Arlington Heights man felt the crush of the bleak economy. With a wife and two kids his cut wages were "just enough to buy groceries on sale." His prospects for finding a new job seemed dim.

As the stress mounted, Noble said he found himself quick to snap, speaking louder and behaving more hostile than normal. He had trouble sleeping. He got headaches.

"I realized, 'If I don't do something, I'm going to go postal,'" Noble, now 34, said. "It wasn't healthy for me, it wasn't healthy for my relationships."

With home values plunging, gas and food prices surging and layoffs straining an already tight job market, people are feeling as stressed as their wallets.

Seventy-five percent of Americans say they are stressed about money, according to a poll conducted in April by the American Psychological Association. Fifty-six percent of respondents said they're stressed about housing costs, and 48 percent about job stability.

Clinical psychologist Nancy Molitor said she has had an influx of patients coming to her with financial worries.

"I've never seen this much broad-based reaction to a stressful situation," said Molitor, who has a practice in Wilmette. "This is affecting people on an ongoing basis, and when it becomes a chronic situation it has much more pervasive and long-term effects."

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Debt stress is 14 percent higher this year than it was in 2004, according to an Associated Press-AOL poll released in June, and people say it is affecting their health.

Among people who reported high debt stress, 27 percent reported digestive tract problems, 44 percent reported headaches and 51 percent reported muscle tension, according to The Associated Press. People with low debt stress were far less likely to report those symptoms.

If stress goes unchecked, it can be dangerous.

Stress, which tends to come when one feels out of control, causes the muscles to tense up, arteries to constrict and the hormone cortisol to be released in the body. When you produce a lot of cortisol for long periods of time, your body, like a car going 85 mph, goes on overdrive and gets exhausted, said Kathleen Hall, founder and CEO of The Stress Institute in Atlanta.

Prolonged stress is a risk factor in a host of illnesses, including heart disease, high blood pressure and diabetes. It can exacerbate asthma, gastrointestinal problems, headaches and allergies, Molitor said. Some studies show it could be a predictor of Alzheimer's.

Worried his stress was getting the best of him, Noble turned to The Stress Relief Center in Northbrook.

Howard Weissman, the center's founder and a clinical psychologist, uses alternative medicine techniques—breathing, meditation, the unblocking of chis and repairing of leaking chakras—to identify stressors people may not even be aware they have.

"I teach them to go within themselves and use the powers in their own mind to quiet the thoughts and transform it into energy that moves them in a new direction," Weissman said.

Noble, who has been seeing Weissman once a week for the past six months, said the techniques have kept him from flying off the handle and have allowed him to remain functional despite his back pain and financial angst.

Taking control of the stress is key to combating it, Weissman said.

"If you don't do anything, it'll always get worse," he said. "It's the inaction that creates the stress."