

# WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

## How are you feeling?

*Stress can affect workers and businesses just as much as the recession, experts say*

BY MAT BOES | of the VBJ

When the economy fell like a stone in December 2007, it was as if no one saw it coming. Politicians and media outlets scrambled to assign blame, the television was plastered with human interest stories as the unemployment rate began to spike to levels unseen since the recession in the early 1980s.

While the recession has deeply affected the average worker financially, the toll of the downturn on mental health is an issue often overlooked. And though stress related to the economy is most apparent in those who are unemployed, negative mental health issues also confront those lucky enough to hold onto their jobs.

“What people are going through – while it may not be as stressful as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, it is still very bad,” said Judy

Clark College, a free community event designed to educate the public about psychological issues. Held every week while classes are in session, the first topic tackled by the group was PTSD – an appropriate subject since 59 enrollees at the school said they had lost family in Iraq and Afghanistan.

According to VanPatten, the speeches run the gamut in an effort to help the average person evolve their views about mental health. “We need to educate people, to de-stigmatize mental illness. Everybody has problems. Every relationship has problems. That is normal,” she said.

The division chair of counseling at Clark College, Dr. Tim Cook, has also taken an active role in mental health since the economic collapse first hit.

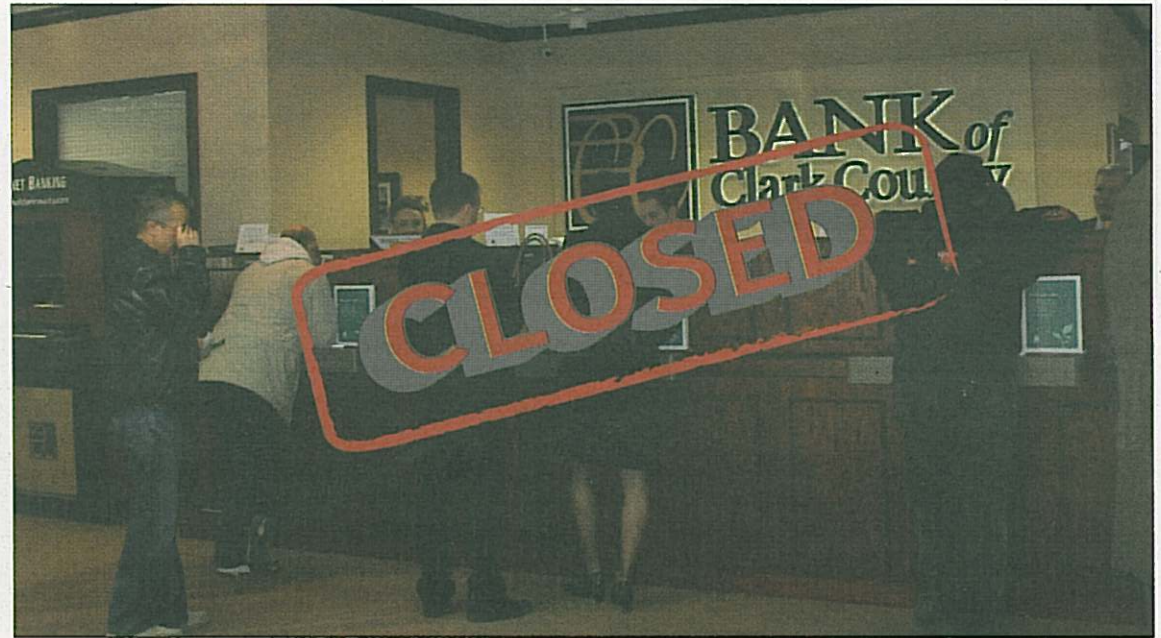
“We’ve had a dramatic increase in cases since the recession

started,” Cook said. “With the economy, kids, school, jobs... people are at wits end.”

Research looking into the effects of the downturn on U.S. workers seems to fall in line with Cook’s assessment.

A Gallup poll taken in March 2009 found that two-thirds of respondents were “struggling or suffering because of stress from the current economic recession.”

Bringing the business



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More than two years of recession has taken its toll, both financially and mentally, on almost everyone. Above, a file photo of the Bank of Clark County, which employed dozens before its failure and transfer to Umpqua Bank in January 2009. At left, Clark College psychology professor Kathy Bobula covers coping skills – which can be critical for workers and business owners dealing with the stress brought on by the recession.

community into the picture, Cook points out how a basic psychological precept which governs human action can have an impact on employees and output.

“Stress coats everything,” he said.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, a concept used by many psychologists and counselors, sets up all human interactions in a pyramid, from bottom to top: Physiological, Safety, Love/Belonging, Esteem and Self Actualization. If the lower needs are not met, then the higher ones won’t be considered, which isn’t good for employees or employers, Cook said.

And while stress is a global phenomenon, its particular

makeup in the U.S. is unique in its intent focus on money and the economy, according to VanPatten.

“In countries full of poverty, people have a different mindset. The economy doesn’t affect their stress levels as much,” she said.

VanPatten noted that in many third-world nations, where survival is sometimes a day-to-day struggle, much more emphasis is placed on family and friends.

The American dream, according to Cook, is often equated with material possessions – a house, cars and the balance in one’s bank account. Losing these things, he says, can be like having one’s dream and identity taken away.

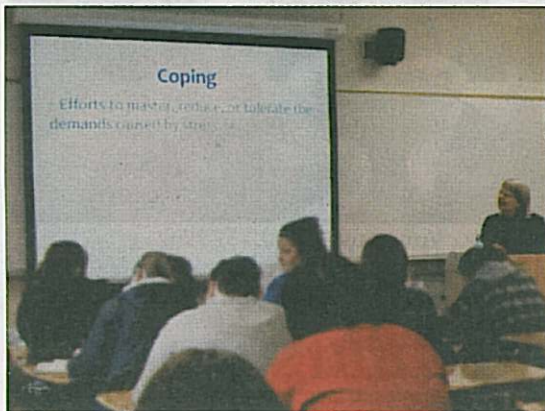
“When someone meets you, they ask, ‘What do you do?’ And if

they don’t, they are wondering it.” Cook said.

However, this source of identity might be a trend that is dying out in the U.S., especially amongst younger generations, according to Cook. “Generation Y might have a healthier approach to work. On average they have upwards of 10 careers in their life, and don’t get as caught up in the stress game,” he said.

While younger people tend to have more fluidity in a volatile economy, older generations may have more trouble adapting to today’s job market.

“A person who is over 50, who has had one career is unfortunately equipped to deal with new prospects,” says Cook.



VanPatten, a counselor at Clark College with more than 30 years of experience in the mental health field.

VanPatten also runs the Mental Health Monday program at

# Workers being stretched thin in the midst of unprecedented recession

Stats showing ballooning number of unemployed in Washington State:

|                      | Labor Force | Employment | #Unemployed | Rate |
|----------------------|-------------|------------|-------------|------|
| Dec 2007             | 3,431,132   | 3,273,560  | 157,572     | 4.6  |
| Apr 2008             | 3,462,989   | 3,281,503  | 181,486     | 5.2  |
| Aug 2008             | 6,489,196   | 3,300,376  | 188,820     | 5.4  |
| Dec 2008             | 3,525,523   | 3,295,451  | 230,072     | 6.5  |
| Apr 2009             | 3,539,901   | 3,222,115  | 317,786     | 9.0  |
| Aug 2009             | 3,563,291   | 3,241,062  | 322,229     | 9.0  |
| Dec 2009 (Projected) | 3,509,204   | 3,174,430  | 334,774     | 9.5  |

...All while nationwide stats show increasing employee output:

|          | Output | Hourly Compensation | Hours |
|----------|--------|---------------------|-------|
| Dec 2007 | +1.8   | +5                  | -0.2  |
| Apr 2008 | 0      | +1.5                | -1.6  |
| Aug 2008 | -3.0   | +4.0                | -3.5  |
| Dec 2008 | -7.6   | +2.9                | -8.3  |
| Apr 2009 | -8.8   | -4.0                | -8.0  |
| Aug 2009 | 1.5    | +6.0                | -4.5  |
| Dec 2009 | 7.2    | +1.5                | +1.0  |

Unfortunately, says VanPatten, the very people who are most susceptible to stress from this economic downturn may be the least likely to get help.

"For members of the older generation, it is much harder to admit you need help," she said. "It's generally easier for younger people than older people and for women than men."

And while many point to stress as a major factor in everyday American life, not many go into the practical application of how to define stress and what it means, according to Cook.

"The body doesn't distinguish what kind of stress you have. It doesn't care if you are scared of your boss or a predator," Cook said. "It reacts just the same."

But one thing is clear: the effects of stress on mental and physical health can be devastating. The American Stress Institute has found that stress can be linked to a number of health issues, from depression to cardiovascular problems — and even increases one's susceptibility to cancer.

There are also behavioral risks in how people respond to stressful situations, such as prolonged

periods of job loss, putting in lots of extra hours to impress the boss or trying to make sales in an increasingly competitive environment.

"Stress affects every person differently. What is more important is how someone reacts, and not every way is good and helpful," VanPatten said. "Some people, for instance, turn to drugs and alcohol."

However, there are easy steps to counteract stress.

"Take control of the things you can at work. Or if you can't control anything at work, do it at home," Cook said.

Managers and business owners can also take a role in removing the impact of stress on their workers by taking advantage of the Employee Assistance Program, which offers free counseling to those who need it. According to Cook, many employees may be afraid of appearing weak or too embarrassed to admit they are having a rough time. In those cases, he said, it is the higher-ups that should take the first step.

"Business owners have their own stresses, including worrying about their employee's stress," Cook

said. "[But] it can be as easy as having a conversation."

For stressed out workers, VanPatten suggests reaching out to family members and close friends to figure out the root-cause of the problem and how to solve it.

"Just find someone who knows how to listen. Most of the time, people have the real answers within," she said.

Stress is a constant in most people's lives, and in America — especially in Clark County, with a staggering 13.7 percent unemployment rate as of last December — most of that anxiety is likely to revolve around money.

But counselors like VanPatten and Cook seem determined to drill in the message that we ultimately have control of how and when to react to stressful situations — even though we feel powerless to change the situations themselves.

And far from seeing signs of a simple recovery, where workers are rehired, families begin to spend again and strained employees breathe a sigh of relief, Cook instead has observed a profound shift in the way people view their families, finances... and their work.

"It only has as much power as we buy into it," he said. "It's just a job." **VBJ**