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Financial Hardship

Financial hardship can be defined as struggling to make ends meet. In other words, expenses are greater than available resources to meet the expenses. While low income individuals are more likely to experience financial hardship, according to this definition, middle and higher income individuals can experience financial hardship if expenses exceed monetary resources.

It isn't news that stress adversely affects health, and it isn't surprising that financial hardship is a potent stressor. Numerous studies have found health consequences of financial hardship:

- Among persons with chronic pain, the presence of financial hardship is associated with reports of more severe pain.
- Couples experiencing financial hardship were more likely to have mental and physical health problems 12 years later.
- In the United Kingdom, persons over 50 years old who reported financial hardship were more likely to be obese.
- The presence of more financial hardship was associated with more childhood obesity in Los Angeles County neighborhoods.
- Financial hardship is associated with poorer self-rated health, even when removing the effects of demographic factors, overall socioeconomic status, and psychological distress.
- Financial hardship is a predictor of poorer sleep quality.

- Among spinal cord injured residents of Switzerland (a wealthy country), those experiencing financial hardship had poorer health, poorer quality of life, and more pain. Household income itself was not associated with these health indicators.

A recent publication in the American Journal of Health Promotion reported that among low income housing residents, those reporting financial hardship (having no money left over at the end of the month) had less healthy diets, were more likely to be physically inactive, and were more likely to smoke. Simply being “low income” itself was less a determinant of poor health behaviors than was the experience of financial hardship.

There is evidence that the stress of financial hardship may affect brain structure. After controlling for risk factors for brain atrophy, investigators have found that persons experiencing financial hardship had decreased volume in the hippocampus and amygdala upon examination of MRI data. The hippocampus is involved with the regulation of emotion as well as memory function, whereas the amygdala plays a significant role in emotional reactivity. Animals subjected to stress have been found to have similar changes in brain structure.

Certainly financial hardship can be a product of circumstances over which individuals have no control. However, in developed nations, the majority of persons have at least some control over how income and expenses are balanced. People often are susceptible to allowing expenses to rise to meet income, or beyond... so that expenses rise above income. This state, defined as financial hardship, appears to be bad for health, as evidenced by the studies mentioned earlier.

Improving one's finances is a common New Year's resolution. While better money management isn't ordinarily thought of as a health-related goal, perhaps it is an endeavor that can have beneficial health consequences.

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