

# When stress is a way of life

As the recession drags on, long-term psychological, physical effects start to show

**By Terri Yablonsky Stat**  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Now that the economic downturn is firmly rooted in our national psyche, stress is catching up with many Chicagoans. Unfortunately, we're not doing enough to combat its effects.

Brad Schweiger, was laid off from his job as an attorney at a small family law firm in February 2009. He's now working two jobs, doing document review on a contract basis and also doing part-time legal work for a law firm.

"I try to go running to reduce my stress, but it's harder to do in the winter," said Schweiger, 28, of Chicago.

More than 70 percent of the city's residents cite work, the economy and money as significant causes of stress, according to a new survey by the American Psychological Association, or APA. Job satisfaction is on the decline too. Sixty percent of Chicagoans said they were satisfied this year, down from 66 percent in 2009 and 74 percent in 2008.

"When the recession first started, we saw lots of insomnia, drinking, feeling jittery and anxious, and stomach pain," said Nancy Molitor, public education coordinator for the APA. "People were worried about losing their jobs and health insurance."

Now two years later, whether employed and picking up slack from downsized staffs or unemployed, Chicagoans are reporting fatigue, irritability, anger, depression and exhaustion.

"It's a chronic situation," said Molitor, who is also a clinical psychologist. "The longer you stay depressed or have chronic fatigue, the less likely you are to spontaneously pull yourself out."

And more people are having trouble managing their stress, citing lack of willpower, motivation, cost and time as obstacles to making lifestyle and behavioral changes. The study found that 59 percent of Chicago adults say healthy stress management is important, while only 35 percent say they are successful in stress management.

"We recognize that we need to manage stress, but things tend to get in the way of actually making those changes," said Andrew R. Farra, a licensed clinical psychologist at NorthShore University HealthSystem.

Chicagoans are also worrying more about their personal health, with 63 percent reporting it as a source of stress, up from 37 percent in 2009. Nationally, 52 percent of American adults cite personal health as a source of stress.

Farra says that eating well, exercising and getting adequate sleep are essential to good health and reducing stress. He also suggests eliminating stimulants such as caffeine, nicotine and sugar, and recommends winding down at least 30 minutes before bedtime.



## HEALTHKEY™

healthkey.com



Find health tools, resources, expert advice and more.

"Don't watch the nightly news right before bed," Farra cautioned. "Avoid the computer and texting too."

Farra also advocates reaching out to someone important in your life. "Having a person to talk through some of the stressors of the day can go a long way in reducing stress." He said the good news is that overall stress levels for Chicago residents are down from last year.

"Absolutely we have reason to feel optimistic. It's a matter of people taking the time to take care of themselves during this difficult time and knowing that their effort is going to pay off," he said.

That message has sunk in for Jennifer Kott, despite being saddled with personal and fi-

ancial stress. Laid off from her job as an editor in 2008, she's been looking for work and taking care of her father-in-law, who has dementia.

"My husband is working, but I'm trying to balance family responsibility with the need to pay the bills," said Kott, 39. "I'm stressed out all the time."

Kott enrolled in the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Program for Depression and Anxiety at NorthShore University Health System. With the help of relaxation exercises and meditation, the four-week group therapy program taught her to live "in the moment."

"Meditation and mindfulness training gave me a comfortable, easy way to process those stressors so I wasn't focusing all of my energy on being stressed," said Kott. "I reprogrammed my way of thinking so I can enjoy my life more."

Schweiger, the laid-off attorney, is trying to stay optimistic, even though he doesn't see work picking up in his field.

"The legal market is flooded. It's becoming increasingly difficult to break in," he said. On a positive note, however, he's getting married next October.

## NOTES

### FREE SCREENINGS

■ Mercy Medical at Dearborn Station will offer convenient free blood pressure screenings as part of a Wellness Wednesday program. 10 a.m. Wednesday. Neighborhood: South Loop, 47 W. Polk St. (between Dearborn and Federal streets). Call 312-922-3011.

■ Check your blood pressure with free screenings in the main lobby of Weiss Memorial Hospital. 1 p.m. Tuesday, 4646 N. Marine Drive. For more information call 773-564-5666.

### ALZHEIMER'S SUPPORT

Northwestern Memorial Hospital will hold a spousal support group specific to the spouses/partners of individuals with Alzheimer's and related illnesses. Ideas to decrease stress are discussed and experiences are shared. 10:30 a.m. Monday, Department of Medicine Conference Room, 645 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 630. Free. Call Mary O'Hara at 312-503-0604.

### INDOOR WALKING GROUP

Keep those extra calories in check this holiday season with a morning walk every Friday. Home Healthcare Solutions of Illinois joins Weiss Memorial Hospital in offering this free exercise program. 9:30 a.m. Friday, WISE Senior Center, 4646 N. Marine Drive. Call 773-564-5666.

Send health and wellness items held in Chicago at least two weeks in advance to [city@tribune.com](mailto:city@tribune.com).

# 'You should never give up'

3 years ago, Sam was left with the motor skills of an infant; now he's playing Santa at the hospital that cared for him

**By Karen Ann Cullotta**  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Charlie Benson recalls a past holiday season when his life seemed bound by an unending streak of good luck: terrific job, great marriage to his wife, Collette Benson, and, above all, a happy, healthy son, Sam.

"We were living the perfect life in Arlington Heights," said Benson, a crew chief with the village's Public Works Department. "Everything was good, and like most people, I thought nothing bad could ever happen to us."

But that idyllic life began to unravel in October 2007, when Sam, then 10, was stricken by a barrage of grand mal seizures. Soon, doctors at Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago would be presenting the Bensons with a heartbreaking decision.

"They had done every test you can think of — CAT scans, MRIs and spinal taps — and they still couldn't get a handle on what was causing the seizures," Charlie Benson said. "The doctors were worried about the damage the seizures were doing to Sam's brain, so they suggested that the best thing they could do was put him in a coma to stabilize him while they searched for an answer."

Three weeks later, doctors had solved the mystery: A rare autoimmune disease was causing Sam's body to produce deadly antibodies that were attacking the blood vessels of his brain.

The diagnosis was a breakthrough, but as doctors slowly brought Sam out of the drug-induced coma, it was clear that the family's challenges were not behind them. While halting the seizures had protected Sam from further permanent brain damage, he awoke from the coma unable to talk, walk or swallow.

"Sam was like an infant again," his father said. "But when he was ready to be released from the hospital, I thought, 'If I have to take care of him the rest of his life, then fine, I can do this.'"

Three years after he was forced to reboot his young life, Sam, now 13, returned to Children's Memorial this month not in a wheelchair but walking proudly alongside his dad as the pair delivered bags of Christmas presents for critically ill children who will spend their holiday season in the pediatric intensive-care unit.

"Sam has got a tremendous sense of humor, and he takes everything in stride," said Dr. Mark Wainwright, Sam's pediatric neurologist and director of the neurocritical care program at Children's Memorial.

Wainwright described his patient's



Sam Benson, 13, hugs nurse Danielle Bielanski at Children's Memorial Hospital, where Sam was diagnosed three years ago with a rare autoimmune disorder. Now recovered, he handed out gifts to patients this month in the intensive care unit. KERI WIGINTON/TRIBUNE PHOTO



Charles, Sam and Colette Benson, three years ago. FAMILY PHOTO

amazing recovery as "a credit to Sam's parents and a whole team effort at the hospital."

Treating Sam's autoimmune disease is

the key to stopping the seizures, Wainwright said, so three years after the boy's initial diagnosis, doctors still deliver immunoglobulin treatments every two to

three months.

While the Bensons were warned that their son might never fully recover from the devastation of the seizures, mentally or physically, today he's an energetic seventh-grader at South Middle School who has managed to surpass even the most optimistic prognosis.

"He started with simple stuff, like putting together a five-piece puzzle, and then moving on to a 10-piece puzzle," Charlie Benson said. "Some days I'd think, 'OK, this is as good as it's going to get,' and then, one day Sam learned to skip again, and soon after that, he was back riding his scooter. Pretty soon, we were playing catch in the yard."

Benson attributed Sam's recovery to the medical team at Children's Memorial, as well as his son's teachers and social workers at Arlington Heights School District 25, who often dropped by the family's home after school hours to volunteer as tutors and provide encouragement and support to the family.

"I remember when I couldn't even pick up a spoon," said Sam. "Life can be pretty hard, but you should never give up trying your best at everything."

"Sometimes he still gets sad, and he asks, 'Dad, why did this happen to me?'" added Benson, "and I always tell him, 'Sam, you are a miracle.'"