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Time

### Bad Habits Boom In A Bad Economy

Kiri Blakeley, 12.01.09, 03:30 PM EST

The newly laid off resort to bad behaviors to get them through the day.



Kiri Blakeley

I've been laid off. Got a cig?

The number of people who smoke, according to a recent report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has remained steady for the fifth year in a row. But for the first time since 1994, rates went up ever so slightly.



"It's alarming," says spokeswoman Elizabeth Rudin, who attributes the extra puffing to inadequately funded anti-smoking programs.

But I blame the economy!

Think about it, if you are either a) laid off or b) doing all your laid off former coworkers' jobs, you are so stressed out that you are going to start indulging in some bad habits. Like smoking.

"I'm seeing an increase in bad lifestyle choices," confirms Jonathan Alpert, a New York psychotherapist and relationship columnist. "People are staying up until the wee hours of the morning, there's an increase in smoking, drinking and sexual behaviors like surfing porn and using hookers."

One former editor, who was laid off last year, has stayed away from the hookers but admits to becoming a serious imbibor since transitioning from a regular job to a stay-at-home tweeter for a financial blog. "I'm not drinking because I'm depressed, but because I can," he says. "My whole life has time shifted." When he had the full-time gig, he'd be home by 8 p.m. and share a bottle of wine with his wife over dinner. Now, he's done with his day in the late morning and the booze comes out before the kids get home at 3 p.m. "The challenge is to make sure I'm not completely blotto by the time my wife comes home from work," he says.

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Debbie Mandel, a stress management expert and author of *Addicted to Stress*, says that in times of uncertainty people turn to bad habits to either numb their pain or experience an adrenaline rush. "They seek to replace the low with a high," she says. Apparently so--Mandel reports seeing an increase in her clients' marijuana use.

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People are also shoplifting more. According to the Global Retail Theft Barometer study, stealing has risen 6% during the past year. Retailers attribute the increase in five-fingered discounting to the soured economy because of the items being pocketed--fresh meat, for instance, is a particular favorite.

Experts are also seeing an increase in sleep disorders. When my own job status recently went from "employed" to "it's complicated," I found myself napping at 4 p.m., up at 6 p.m., back to sleep by 11 p.m., and then wide awake between 3 a.m. and 7 a.m. While this gave me plenty of time to IM with my European friends, it wasn't much good for my mental or physical health.

"Disrupted sleep patterns can leave you prone to depression," says Alpert. In fact, calls to the national suicide hotline went up 36% in 2008.

Mandel also says that sleep problems can result in health issues including backaches and headaches, and that's bad news for the newly laid off who may have had their health insurance cut or their premiums doubled.

Alpert advises his unemployed clients to continue to feel a part of the mainstream by structuring their days: Get up (and get dressed!) at 9 a.m., answer e-mails by 10 a.m., send out resumes until lunch, go to the gym in the afternoon--that is, if you can still afford a gym.

Mandel, who is seeing a lot of clients binging on comfort foods to soothe their stress-related anxiety, suggests using healthful alternatives to the typical high-cal junk. Macaroni and cheese, for instance, can be made with wheat pasta and low-fat cheese.

Or you could ditch the ice cream and grab some frozen yogurt. Literally--grab it, along with some fresh meat, and run. Everyone else is.

Just kidding--an arrest for pilfering frozen yogurt wouldn't be the kind of thing you'd want on your updated resume.

*Kiri Blakeley is a writer living in Brooklyn. Her memoir will be out next year from Kensington/Citadel.*

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