

Maintaining Healthy Relationships During Economic Hardships

The economic headlines are ominous: “More Layoffs Predicted”; “Unemployment Claims Climbing”; “Millions Without Healthcare.” If you or someone you care about is included in these statistics, you may already be aware of the strain financial hardships can have on relationships with family members, friends, romantic partners, and even coworkers. Below are some common issues that many are facing and ways to cope.

Your Family

The saying “blood is thicker than water” is often used to stress the importance of always having your family’s back, no matter what. But trying to “do right” by your family can pose a strain if you are the only member of a close-knit family who still has a job, or the one who everyone knows has it to spare. This gets even more complicated if multiples hands are extended.

What You Can Do: There is no one right way to go about dealing with a family member in this situation, but what you should remember is the importance of setting realistic limits and not overextending yourself. Trying to do too much is stressful and can interfere in your ability to handle things in your own life. Conversely, if you are the one who is experiencing a financial hardship, you should never try to make a relative feel guilty for faring better in this economy than you, nor should you embarrass him or her by boasting the specifics of their financial situation.

Your Significant Other

Seeing the man or woman you love face job loss or other financial hardship can be the ultimate test of a relationship's strength survival and ultimate survival. One or both may feel the need to give the other space out of feelings of guilt, embarrassment, or helplessness. "If couples are honest and compassionate with one another, if they learn to work as a team, they could emerge with a better relationship," says Pepper Schwartz, author of the *New York Times* article "Difficult But Valuable Conversations." (April 2009)

What You Can Do: Communicate. Creating an open atmosphere where open and honest discussion can take place without fear of backlash is a vital part of maintaining a romantic relationship during a hardship; particularly one where traditional gender roles may have shifted. If your partner usually foot the bill and can longer do so comfortably, you have to ask yourself if you are comfortable stepping up, and if you are, for how long. If you are the one suffering the hardship, you have to determine how much of an effect you foresee it having on the relationship and communicating with your partner what he or she should expect. During this time, you can mix things up by introducing your spouse or significant other to new and creative activities that are both entertaining and free or low cost. But most importantly know that it is a frustrating time for you both. Your understanding and compassion for each other is needed now more than ever.

Your Friends

When your friends are experiencing financial hardships, you may feel awkward inviting them out to socialize. Or you may feel like you're bragging by telling them about that kudos you got from your supervisor. Though their finances may be different, they are still your friends and may still want to spend time with you, and most importantly, they still want to root for you as you would

for them. Maintaining a sense of normalcy is important for anyone experiencing this type of hardship.

What You Can Do: Try to see each other as often as you did before. Simply meeting up for coffee to remind them that you are there can do wonders in maintaining a friendship through a rough patch. And if you can make the time, offer your assistance to help brainstorm new career moves, or keep an eye and ear out for job prospects in their field.

Your Coworkers

When layoffs or department restructuring hits the workplace it can be a very stressful time where anger consumes the laid off. Guilt can overwhelm the layoff survivors as they adjust to the loss of coworkers, a possible increase in workload, and heightened anxiety about how to behave around those who make hiring and firing decisions. The genuineness of workplace relationships is tested during this time, particularly if a workplace buddy gets to stay while you get the boot, or vice versa. Do you stay in touch or what?

What You Can Do: While it is easy to cut your losses when you or a coworker leaves the workplace, it is important to stay in touch with those whose work ethic or accomplishments you admire. Create or maintain existing connections with them on networking sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. And do not neglect the power of a personal phone call. You cannot afford to lose touch. Depending on your industry and the power of your network, you may miss out on an opportunity by allowing too much time to pass.