

Q. What is the relationship between the economy and mental health?



A. This is an interesting question that can be approached from a few angles. One is that of how a person's personality style or mental health may interplay with their career and/or business dealings; and the other is how the larger economics of a society may cause a person to react in a certain way and effect one's mental health.

First let me discuss some examples of how a person's personality style or mental health may interplay with their career and/or business dealings. For personality, if a person is too passive, they may not pursue career goals. This can lead to feelings of dejection if they never attain satisfaction, and cause them to be economically dependent on others. Persons who must be at the top of what they do, may aggravate others in an organization if they are too aggressive or self-centered. They may also take too many risks in business or investing (in order to be at the top) leading to failure. For example, a person takes out a business loan to grow their company because they feel they must be big, however the company's size then becomes too big for the market and goes bankrupt. Persons who are magnanimous or who are tolerant of the vicissitudes of others, those who like to learn and experience new things, and those that will persist in creatively pursuing goals even if it means failing many times on the way, will feel less stress and often have career and economic success.

Mental health problems can also cause personal changes in economic success or failure. For example, persons with depression often do not have enough energy to function at a job or go to the office. Those who have bipolar disorder may be manic helping them to be prolific and creative leading to successes, although they may aggravate others on the way, and they often cycle into deep depression. They may also involve themselves in multiple projects that have high start-up costs and low potential for success (i.e., buying expensive movie-making equipment and hire staff but have no realistic plan). Persons with attention deficit disorder are often disorganized and fall into jobs below their actual intelligence potential, or aggravate co-workers because they don't finish projects on time or pay attention to where they are supposed to be or what they should do.

On the topic of how the larger economics of a society may cause persons to react in a certain way and effect mental health, this can also be broken down to personality reactions and vulnerability to illness. For personality reactions, persons who are resilient to adversity may do well and take each economic or career crisis as a chance to do something new. Persons who base their self-esteem on their careers and monetary success may have deep dejection if they lose their job due to economic downturn. One's innate temperament mixed with life experiences in dealing with adversity may shape their reaction style.

Persons who have a personal or family history of depression may begin to feel unstable if there is an economic threat to their job or livelihood. Those with bipolar disorder can switch into either depression or even paradoxically euphoric or irritable mania when faced with economic stress. Persons with anxiety disorders, especially panic disorder, may become very anxious and have panic attacks. Some persons with these vulnerabilities may begin to feel suicidal. High risk for suicide is seen in middle-age males, persons who have a personal or family history of suicide, and those who drink alcohol or use drugs.

Whatever vulnerability a person may have to life stress, economic problems in society may naturally threaten one's sense of independence and integrity, cause intense anxiety regarding their ability to care for themselves and family, and cause resentment and aggravation at management and co-workers when there are layoffs, downsizing, and corporate mergers.

This short article can only give a cursory discussion on this complex topic. One should consult with a mental health professional if their reactions are more disturbing than expected and/or they have trouble functioning normally.

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The Meguro Counseling Center provides mental health care for individuals, couples, and families, in both English and Japanese. www.megurocounseling.com