

Helping Friends Cope with Financial Crises

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MontGuide

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ECONOMIC DOWNTURNS HAVE BECOME A REALITY

for many Montana families. Almost every segment of our economy has been affected: farming and ranching, timber and mining, hometown businesses and manufacturing firms alike. Behind the statistics of closings, layoffs, bankruptcies and job losses are people who may need support to help them cope with financial crises.

This guide was developed for Montanans who want to help acquaintances, friends, neighbors or family members who face a financial crisis. It suggests ways to help friends in such circumstances – and how to encourage someone to seek professional help, particularly if they're depressed or are at risk of suicide.

It's hard to know what to do

Sometimes individuals hesitate to get involved or don't know what to do when they're aware of someone in financial crisis. There are several reasons for this hesitation. Montanans pride themselves on being independent and self-reliant. Because of this, friends and neighbors may not reach out to one another in times of trouble.

People may believe that by not saying anything they're being helpful. They may be afraid of saying the wrong thing.

Although it seems irrational, people will often avoid those who are experiencing a financial crisis because they believe getting involved may influence how others see them. Neighbors may think that if they're associated with a family in financial crisis, business owners will be hesitant to extend them credit as well.

Watching a neighbor fail is difficult when you yourself are financially stable. Neighbors who are doing well may avoid a family in financial crisis because of "survivor's guilt."

Understanding how to reach out to a friend experiencing a financial crisis can help you assist them during their time of need. Knowing what resources are available can prepare you to help your friend. And being aware of signs of depression can alert you to a friend's need for professional help.

As a way of keeping ourselves from extending a helping hand, we sometimes rationalize to ourselves why someone's in financial crisis. We may believe a family is to blame for their situation. For example, we may think that the family hadn't managed their money properly, that they bought land when it was too expensive or built an addition to their house rather than saving their money.

At times people don't respond to someone in need because the individual may have withdrawn and isolated himself or herself. In addition, people who are experiencing a crisis are often not enjoyable to be around; they can be angry, sullen or depressed.

Ideas for helping someone experiencing financial crisis

How you respond to someone who's feeling stressed is important. There are actions you can take to overcome hesitancy and reach out to a friend or neighbor in crisis. Avoid making comments such as, "I know exactly how you feel." (Chances are you do not know, even if you've experienced a similar situation.) Unless you're asked for it, don't offer advice, and avoid making judgments about the person or their situation.



• **Listening** One way to help is to listen to your friend – don't underestimate the value of "just listening." Listening is perhaps the most important communication skill. A person under financial stress must be allowed to express his or her feelings. Listening means allowing the person to talk, yell or cry.

Sometimes people just want someone to listen in a supportive way rather than to offer solutions. Sometimes a person understands the cause of his or her financial stress, and can explore possible solutions simply by talking.

• **Connection to the community** Help keep your friend and neighbor and his or her family connected to the community. Perhaps because they're embarrassed about their situation, a family facing financial crisis may withdraw from participating in community events and from interaction with friends. If the family can no longer afford to pay fees and buy materials, the children may quit participating in organizations or events. A family may stop attending religious services. Marital conflict often increases, and the quality of parenting may decline.

Invite the family to go to community events with you. Try to find events that are free or inexpensive. For a potluck dinner you might suggest making a dish together to reduce the cost.

• **The power of small deeds** Helping a friend and his or her family in need doesn't require large undertakings. Stop by for a chat or call your friend on the phone. Make them a plate of cookies. Offer to pick up the kids from school. Knowing that others care can go a long way to help a family.

Understanding depression

A friend in a financial crisis may also be depressed. Being depressed is a medical condition, not a sign of personal weakness. Everyone feels blue now and then, but depression is different than feeling blue. Symptoms of depression are usually fairly constant for two weeks or longer. Some signs of depression include:

- Loss of appetite or overeating
- Feeling down and discouraged that life won't get any better in the future
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Feeling anxious or worried without obvious reason
- Feeling annoyed or irritated by others
- Having diminished interest in family or friends
- Feeling tired and having a hard time getting motivated to get things done
- Having a hard time concentrating and making decisions

- Experiencing aches and pains
- Thinking about death

The more symptoms, the more likely it is that the person is depressed. If the depression persists, encourage the person to get professional help. If he or she appears reluctant to see a mental health professional, or if one isn't available in your community, urge the person to talk to his or her family doctor or clergy.

When you believe there's a risk of suicide

Severe financial crises cause some individuals to take their own lives. Listen for suicide threats and watch for suicidal behavior, especially if the person is depressed. The following are signs that an individual may be at risk for suicide:

- A threat of suicide
- A previous suicide attempt
- Talk of death or despair or preoccupation with thoughts of death
- The recent suicide or death of someone close or of someone with whom they identify
- Expression of feelings of hopelessness and helplessness or of worthlessness
- A sudden interest in life insurance
- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Drug or alcohol abuse or both
- Giving away valued possessions or making final arrangements
- Abrupt changes in behavior
- Sudden, inexplicable euphoria or whirlwind activity after a period of depression

If you believe that suicide is an imminent possibility, stay with the person and get professional help through the person's family physician or a crisis line or by calling 911. Don't leave a suicidal person alone.

Encouraging a friend to seek professional help

Scenario: Ben and Lois have been farming for 15 years. Because of the drought and low commodity prices, they've struggled financially for three years. If they don't have a good harvest this year, they could lose their farm.

Neighbors Patty and Mike are concerned for their friends, especially Ben. He used to be responsible, outgoing and energetic. Now he's forgetting appointments, neglecting his livestock and skipping church. He looks tired and acts withdrawn.

Patty and Mike want to help, but feel Ben needs more than friendly advice. They think Ben needs to talk with a professional counselor about his problems. They wonder how to encourage Ben to seek the help he needs. They worry that he might take offense and feel they're violating his privacy if they raise the subject. But Ben is such a self-reliant person that Patty and Mike worry that he won't reach out and get professional help on his own.

In situations like the one facing Patty and Mike, the following techniques could be used.

- **Locate community resources.** Before talking to your friend, find out what resources are available in your area. In small communities, the resources may be on the county or regional level, so you may have to make a few phone calls to locate them. Check with the county health department or mental health clinic or Extension office, local clergy or physicians.

- **Plan a caring discussion.** Try to talk with your friend when neither of you is rushed or distracted. Use phrases such as, "I've been worried about..." or "I'm bringing this up because I really care about you..."

- **Describe what you've seen.** One way of bringing up the issue is to list the behaviors you've noted in your friend. Your list could include withdrawal from community activities, angry outbursts, and lack of sleep or loss of appetite. Tell your friend, in a caring manner, the specific behaviors you've seen.

- **Protect your friend's privacy.** Find a private space where you won't be interrupted while you're talking. Respect your friend's right to and need for privacy about his or her situation.

- **Ask what your friend thinks and feels.** Being confronted about an emotionally painful problem is stressful. Initially your friend may feel confused, frightened, embarrassed or defensive – or all these things. Responding to your concerns may be difficult. Listen carefully to what your friend says in response, and check to see whether he or she seems to understand what you've said. Support any attempt your friend makes to respond to the concerns you've voiced.

- **Understand possible barriers and offer alternatives.** Several barriers may keep a person from seeking professional help. For example, some people believe that only those who are "mentally ill" seek professional help. They may not realize that counselors routinely work with individuals struggling with personal problems similar to their own. Others may feel they cannot afford counseling fees, or may say they don't have transportation to a mental health provider's office. They may lack information about costs, sliding fee scales, insurance, and the availability of transportation assistance. You can help by looking into some of these practical matters on your friend's behalf.

Some people in crisis feel that confronting the problem will be too stressful, and will indicate that they are "weak." Listen to your friend and help him or her to understand that seeking help is a sign of commitment to making a change, not a sign of weakness.

- **Continue to be supportive.** Your friend will need to make the final decision as to whether or not to seek professional help. Regardless of the outcome, continue to be supportive. Your support could include a weekly date for coffee or regular phone calls. Remember, small displays of support can go a long way.

- **Locate helpful financial resources.** Some people in the midst of a financial crisis don't know how to better manage the resources they have or where to turn for assistance.

In summary

Economic stresses can cause individual and family crises. Understanding how to respond when you see someone experiencing a financial crisis can help you assist them during this time of need. Knowing what resources are available can help you be prepared if friends, neighbors, or family members are looking for information. Being aware of the signs of depression can help you be alert to a friend's need for professional help.



Helpful Publications

MSU Extension publishes a number of free family financial management publications that may be helpful. You might request these materials from your local county or reservation Extension office and share them with your friend. They include:

Montana Families: Taking Control During a Financial Crisis (Bulletin 1342) provides information on assessing current financial resources and setting priorities for paying the bills. The publication also explores alternatives such as reducing credit payments, selling assets, debt-consolidation loans, voluntary surrender or repossessions and bankruptcy.

Schedule of Non-Monthly Family Living Expenses (MT198910HR) provides a clear picture of how a family's non-monthly payments are distributed throughout a 12-month period. At a glance families can see when major bills are due and plan for them.

Developing a Spending Plan (MT199703HR) explains the steps in developing a plan for living within one's income, reducing the need for consumer credit and saving for the things one wants.

A complete list of MSU Extension's family financial management publications is free from:

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