

## Stress management focus of free seminar

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By Jeanne Kniaz, Voice Reporter

In response to a rise in the number of calls for help relating to suicide attempts, domestic violence or other anxiety-related health issues, Richmond-Lenox EMS and the Township of Lenox are teaming up with CARE's WorkLife Solutions and the Macomb County Crisis Center to host a free seminar on strategies for stress management.

"We do a lot of community programs and this is a good example of the kind of effort that we want to be involved in," trainer and consultant Paddy Laske said of CARE's WorkLife Solutions, a full-service Employee Assistance Program that provides tools to manage problems of a personal or professional nature within the workplace.

The event is Feb. 25 at the Lenox Township Hall. Doors open at 6:30 p.m. for refreshments and presentations will commence at 7 p.m.

The seminar is open to everyone in Macomb or St. Clair County - not just the employed.

"We are the employee assistance provider for both Richmond-Lenox EMS as well as Lenox Township so we help both of those organizations in different ways as it pertains to helping their employees balance work/life issues," Director Brenda Szalka said. "When they called me they said they certainly wanted this seminar to be available for their employees, but they also wanted to open it up to the community."

While almost everyone, at one time or another, experiences stress - that being a physical or psychological response to pressure or demanding situations - the way a person deals with stress can greatly affect their health or wellbeing.

"There are two types of stress; good stress and bad stress," Szalka said. "We can have good stress in our lives but that distress, that bad stress, is what can take its toll on us physically. People have medical problems related to stress, more than just not being able to sleep at night. It's high blood pressure and obesity and...heart problems. A very high percentage of emergency room admissions are stress related."

The pressure to cope in a society burdened by a depressed economy, depleted employment opportunities, falling home values, rising costs and healthcare concerns is significant.

"It is just kind of like that perfect storm," Laske said. "As so many things are just not working, I have a feeling that there is just no one not touched by this economy ... and we are all just really stressed and worried about our future. We think, well, we are getting by today but are we going to be okay six months from now...if things don't change? So there is that big cloud that is hanging over everyone."

By way of the agency's interaction with roughly 70 businesses, municipalities and school districts throughout the state, Szalka has definitely noticed an increase in their call volume from people who have reached a breaking point.

"It used to be that people could manage their stress a little better ... but, because there is so much stress now people are breaking under the pressure," she said. "It is affecting them. It is affecting their emotional health, their physical health, their marital relationships, their relationships with their children ... and their coworkers."

Richmond-Lenox EMS Director Jeff White has also observed a disturbing pattern.

"We've seen an increase in our responses for people that I refer to as in despair ... people contemplating suicide, people suffering anxiety-related health issues and we are even seeing increases in things like chest pain and high blood pressure and strokes and, in some of these cases, they are driven by the anxiety people are experiencing right now," he said. "We are seeing an increase in runs for domestic and other violent crimes that often times are being fueled by economic issues and issues that are outside of patient and/or the victim's control. The stress levels in our community are at really what I would call epidemic proportions."

Recognizing the danger signs of distress in oneself and, just as importantly, in others; setting goals to manage stress, and apprising people of community resources are focal points of the presentation.

"The goal of our seminar is twofold. Certainly it is about recognizing and managing our own stresses and setting goals for ourselves but also ... how to recognize when a neighbor or a spouse or a child or coworker is at a breaking point," Szalka said. "How can you recognize signs of depression or suicidal ideation or the close-to-the-breaking-point of those people and then how do you help them? What can you do? What can you say? How do you reach out? We want to build a strong network within the community so that everybody is looking out for everybody."

Laske added that it is important to recognize the role stress plays in peoples' lives.

"That is really what we are going to target - recognizing that stress is playing a role on our physical being ... in how we handle different issues ... and really just focusing on giving people healthy options - not minimizing the stress they are under because that's their reality," she said. "We don't want to sweep that under the rug. What we are facing is real but how we are intentionally dealing with it everyday is really what it's all about."

Cheryl Alexander, a specialist with the Macomb County Crisis Center will also present.

"We are going to partner together to present from our perspective some of the strategies that we know will really help," Laske said. "And there will be time for questions and answers. Our goal is to make it upbeat but make it realistic and informative so that each and every person will come away with some tools that make sense for them on how to build their own stress hardiness because we will get through this. It is going to get better but, in the meantime, we want to keep ourselves strong and reasonably optimistic."

Pre-registration by Feb. 20 will be appreciated and can be arranged by calling (586) 727-2184 or e-mailing **RLEMSC1@aol.com**.

The EMS is also still looking for community service organizations to participate and provide information to the public on available services and assistance.

"What we are looking for are organizations that might be able to bring information for folks that maybe suffering from stress or anxiety-related issues, or whose stress or anxiety may be caused by their current situation with regards to employment or unemployment if you will, or finance, or who are dealing with foreclosure or may be in need of help with regard to those kinds of things ... or what I would call the underlying causes," White said.

For more information, contact at White (586) 727-2184.

For people in need of immediate assistance who may be acutely distressed, in despair, overwhelmed or losing control, help can be obtained by calling, 24 hours a day, the Macomb County Crisis Center at (586) 307-9100 or St. Clair County Community Mental Health at (888) 225-4447.

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