



# Need for Re-evaluation of Distress Responses in Families with Chronic Pain

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## Background

- The adverse effects of chronic pain reach beyond the individual sufferer to have implications on the entire family.<sup>2,5,10</sup>
- Chronic pain introduces unique psychological, social, and economic challenges into family life.
- Increased emotional and psychological distress responses occur in family members due to accumulating responsibilities and financial strain.<sup>4,5,13</sup>
- Investigations re-evaluating these responses within the context of the economic recession are lacking.
- **Purpose:** To identify family distress responses common to chronic pain and the recent economic recession, and to emphasize the need for re-evaluation given the economic recession.

## Method

- A literature search was conducted in EBSCOhost including all supported databases to identify family responses to chronic pain.
- Responses selected for in-depth review: Emotional distress, depressive symptomatology, and anxiety
- Review of distress responses revealed associations with economic factors, as well as several assessment and intervention strategies

## Economics of Chronic Pain

Chronic pain within the family was found to cause significant financial strain. This may result from:

- Pain-related disability leading to compromised or lost employment<sup>1,5,10,12</sup>
- Double-income households being reduced to single-income households<sup>5,12</sup>
- The experience of chronic pain within the family negatively affecting healthy family members' work performances<sup>11</sup>
- Reallocation of family resources towards chronic pain management, which may be expensive<sup>2</sup>

Additionally:

- Healthy family members often assume increased employment responsibilities, frequently in addition to caregiving or parenting responsibilities.<sup>5,7,10-12</sup>

## Distress Responses

### Chronic Pain-Related:

An overall increase in responsibilities and chronic pain-related financial strain, in addition to altered family dynamics, disruption of interpersonal relationships, and social isolation contribute to the following distress responses.<sup>1,2,4,5,13</sup>

- Emotional distress
- Depressive symptomatology
- Anxiety

Of significance, young children of individuals with chronic pain are often the least emotionally protected due to developing cognitive and coping resources.<sup>1,2</sup>

### Economic Recession-Related:

Many factors of the recent economic recession have increased levels of emotional and financial stress within families, including:

- Unemployment or underemployment
- Decreased household income
- Loss of benefits, including health insurance
- Increasing cost of living
- Upside-down mortgages and foreclosures, which have been associated with increased risk for psychiatric disorders such as depression and generalized anxiety disorder<sup>6,8</sup>

Many of these factors often occur simultaneously and can also result in significant interpersonal conflict and disagreement, thereby impairing the integrity of familial relationships.<sup>9</sup>

No recent literature was found exploring how family members of individuals with chronic pain are responding in light of the recent economic recession.

A key question that emerged through this review:

- How do the family responses to chronic pain interact with recession-related responses to affect family adaptation, health, and overall well-being?



## Practice Implications

Healthcare professionals are encouraged to assess individuals with chronic pain and their family members for:

- Accumulation of stress and maladaptive responses
- Economic or financial circumstances
- Family strengths and resiliency<sup>14</sup>

Recommended interventions to reduce family distress responses related to chronic pain include:

- Family health education<sup>10,14</sup>
- Involvement of family in pain management regimen<sup>10,14</sup>
- Development of strength-based individual and family coping strategies<sup>14</sup>

Recommended interventions to reduce distress related to economic or financial strain include:

- Interdisciplinary collaboration<sup>6,8</sup>
- Referral to crisis counselors, social workers, and mental health professionals as appropriate<sup>6,8</sup>

## Conclusions

- The responses of emotional distress, depressive symptomatology, and anxiety are common to both family members of chronic pain individuals and those experiencing financial strain or facing foreclosure.<sup>1,2,4-6,8,13</sup>
- For many families in the United States, the economic recession has resulted in unexpected and often concurrent financial stressors, which create trying circumstances for even well-adapted families.<sup>6,8</sup>
- Further research to investigate the occurrence and interaction of financial stressors and cumulative distress responses is critical given dramatic changes in the economic environment.

Reference list available upon request.

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