

Job security, finances strongly related to increased anxiety during pandemic

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In mid-April 2020, the national unemployment rate reached 14.7 percent—the highest since the Great Depression. Forty-one million American workers filed for unemployment between February and May of 2020.

Unprecedented unemployment rates don't just have an impact on the unemployed, though. For people still employed during the COVID-19 pandemic, [job insecurity](#) and financial concern are associated with greater symptoms of depression and [anxiety](#), according to findings from the UConn School of Nursing published recently in the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, or *JOEM*.

"The impact the virus and the pandemic is having on the economy and employment is not surprisingly taking a big toll," says Natalie J. Shook, a social psychologist, associate professor in the School of Nursing, and principal investigator for the study.

The findings are part of a year-long examination of how behavior and social attitudes change, and

what factors influence those changes, when people in the United States are faced with the threat of widespread disease. Supported by a National Science Foundation grant, the study is tracking the well-being, feelings, and behavioral practices of about 1,000 individuals across the United States, and more than 18 surveys of the participants have already been conducted since March.

"We definitely are seeing, within our employed participants, higher rates of anxiety than in individuals who indicated they were not employed," says Shook, noting that most study participants who are not employed are retirees. "Controlling for demographics, controlling for [income level](#), and also taking into account participant health and concerns about COVID—and the extent to which people were engaging in social distancing or quarantine—we are seeing that job security and financial concerns are the significant predictors associated with anxiety and depression."

The study asked participants to identify symptoms of anxiety by asking if they were feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge, or if they were not able to stop or control their worrying. They were also asked about the extent of their financial concerns—how worried they were about their employment and financial situation, if they expected their financial situation to get worse over the next 12 months, and if they had the means to secure food and housing for their family for the next 12 months.

Most study participants reported some level of worry about the effects of COVID-19 on their employment. While previous studies have linked large-scale disruptions like recessions and pandemics with poor mental health, the researchers note that their study importantly expands on these associations by demonstrating independent links between greater financial concern with greater anxiety symptoms, and greater job insecurity with greater depressive symptoms, after accounting for demographics,

health, and other COVID-19 concerns and experiences.

Shook and her research team say employers can play a critical role in supporting the mental health of their employees by recognizing the increased anxiety that workers experience when their job security feels threatened during the pandemic.

"Our results demonstrate the potential adverse consequences that job insecurity and financial concern have on [employee](#) mental health," the researchers write. "Based on these findings, for those experiencing depressive symptoms during the pandemic, it may be particularly important for employers to be mindful and try to minimize feelings of uncertainty for the employees, as well as instilling hope or agency in employees. For those experiencing anxiety symptoms, employers could attempt to reduce financial concerns by allowing employees to continue to work (eg, telework), even with reduced hours and income, to ensure that employees do not lose their entire income."

More information: Jenna M. Wilson et al, Job Insecurity and Financial Concern During the COVID-19 Pandemic Are Associated With Worse Mental Health, *Journal of Occupational & Environmental Medicine* (2020). [DOI: 10.1097/JOM.0000000000001962](#)

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