

Hitting the couch amid a crunch

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Real estate brokers and agents may finally be becoming couch potatoes. The therapist's couch, that is. As more real estate firms downsize — and more brokers see their bank accounts shrink — therapists report more anxiety among patients who work in real estate, and at least one brokerage is considering bringing in a psychologist to talk to its agents about their stresses.

"There's a need to continually reach out in our business from management: Not just 'How's business?' because we know how it is ... but [to ask], 'How are you and how are you coping?'" said Kathy Braddock, co-founder of Charles Rutenberg Realty.

Braddock said the firm is considering bringing in a psychologist to help brokers air their concerns. "It can be depressing and it can feel a little overwhelming, and one should not feel that they're completely alone in this," she said.

When the economy gets rocky, it's easy for people to lose perspective, mental health pros say. "The rules of the market are just thrown out the window right now, and that stresses out people incredibly," said Dr. Kenneth Mueller, a psychotherapist in Greenwich Village who counts many real estate and financial executives among his patients.

Dr. Mueller noted that lately he has been prescribing more anti-anxiety and sleeping medication. However, he said, he's also encouraging patients to consider lifestyle changes.

"Now that there are less deals, there is more time to tend to things they really should have been attending to all along," he said, adding that spending time with family and exercising are good choices.

Another Manhattan-based psychologist, Dr. Eli Mayer, said many of the things his patients have become accustomed to, like big paychecks and prestige, are now unavailable and will not return in the foreseeable future. That, in turn, makes patients feel vulnerable. "What's happening is that people are having to develop or rely on other ways of feeling secure or less anxious," Dr. Mayer explained, noting that many professionals are in uncharted territory with regard to anxiety about work and will have to learn new coping mechanisms. "Any time somebody's reliant on a single strategy, they then don't have the ability to adapt," he said.

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