

# Economic Crisis, Unemployment Take Emotional Toll

by ALIX SPIEGEL



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Newspaper headlines reflect the worsening recession. Massive job losses in January bumped the unemployment rate to 7.6 percent. Analysts expect it will continue to rise over the next six months.

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On Nov. 4 at 4:01 p.m., Sylvia Martinez looked up from her desk and noticed that her boss was crossing the room, walking — she realized — in the direction of her workstation.

Martinez was a human resources administrator who supervised a handful of employees. She made \$52,000 a year, plus bonus, and had been at the job for a year and a half. Martinez loved her work. At the end of the day, she could look back through the hours and see clearly what she had accomplished. It was all satisfyingly tangible.

That is why her conversation with her boss was so totally unexpected, she says.

"We went into the project director's office and I was fired. I was just like, 'OK.' I didn't know what else to say," Martinez says.

## A Troubled Time

During this economic downturn, there have been a staggering number of layoffs, and almost every day brings news of more. Worker upon worker is cut loose from his desk and the daily routines that structure one's life.

While many people are resilient in the face of unemployment, for some there are real emotional costs. Martinez, a Northern Virginia woman who has never struggled with profound depression before, is one of the latter.

In the days that followed her job loss Martinez told no one she had been fired — not even her family. No job meant no community college for her son and daughter and no preschool for her 4-year-old grandson. And Martinez didn't want to upset them. And, so, she said nothing when she came home that night.

The next morning when she woke up, she told her family that she was staying home to watch election results. The morning after that, her excuse was a headache. But, she says, panic attacks made the poker face hard to maintain.

"I would start thinking about it and my heart would start racing and I would start sweating and [having] chest pains," she says. "And, of course, at that point I would try to hide, because I didn't want my children to know what was going on with me. So I would go to the bathroom and just stay in there. Just go through it in the bathroom."

In the three months since she was let go, this sense of panic and fear has not improved.

"I apply for jobs and apply for jobs and no one calls. Nobody. I've even gone as far as applying at fast-food places; I've applied at Wal-Mart, at Kmart, at Target," she says.

And in mid-December, these feelings of depression and anxiety that Martinez had struggled with since she was let go tipped into something more serious.

After an argument with her children over money, she found herself fighting thoughts of suicide. She called a suicide crisis line, but hung up when the phone was answered.

She walked down the hall, sat for a half an hour with her 4-year-old grandson, told him he could grow up to be anything that he wanted, then went back to her bedroom and swallowed four muscle relaxants, six painkillers and three Tylenol PMs. She woke up sick throughout the night, and then pulled herself from bed at 8 a.m. She says she felt utterly ashamed.

### **Not The Only One**

It's tricky to measure the emotional price of an economic downturn. But if you're looking for a rough gauge, one place to go is a small room filled with phones and computers on the third floor of a nondescript brick building in Northern Virginia. This is the office of [CrisisLink](#), a suicide hot line. CrisisLink is, in fact, the line that Martinez hung up on the night she tried to kill herself.

A strange thing has happened in that room over the past 12 months. The number of calls has shot up. Suicide calls, in particular, are much higher than they were the year before. The hot line used to get around 150 suicide calls a month; now it is closer to 270 — 77 percent higher than the year before.

And the severity of the calls is also on the rise. Crisis operators call in the police for help 40 percent more than they used to. Calls that concern primarily financial matters also are up 40 percent.

These numbers are available because CrisisLink keeps meticulous records of its calls. But according to Margaret Mathis, a manager at the hot line, you really don't need a spreadsheet to know what is going on.

"Even if we didn't have a little check box to check to actually count them, we know that we're hearing more now than we did. It's very different than it was," she says.

Other crisis hot lines, in Florida and in Texas, also have reported increases. And the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#), a network of interlinked lines like CrisisLink, says that the number of calls they have gotten in the past year has risen around 35 percent.

Now, it's important to be careful with these numbers. Mathis points out that more calls do not mean more suicides. She says it's better to view them as a crass gauge of stress in the country. But one advantage of looking at crisis call lines is that users really do cross the economic spectrum.

Mathis talks about the calls she has gotten just in the past couple weeks: a man concerned for a family member who had lost millions; a poor single mother of three a night or two away from living on the streets. And then there was the middle-aged woman who called because she had recently been laid off from her job of 20 years and was literally paralyzed with fear. She told Mathis she was unable to leave her bed.

Mathis says that these people call the line at least, in part, because they are comforted by the anonymity of the line. She says people often feel an intense sense of shame after losing a job, and many will resist even talking to family and friends.

### **Still Struggling**

That is clearly the case with Sylvia Martinez. She says that, though she is close to her father, she could not bring herself to tell him that she had lost her job until two weeks ago, three months after she had been let go. Likewise, she doesn't talk about her problems with her kids, though she does feel that her 4-year-old grandson can sense that she's in trouble.

"He's always asking me if I'm going to leave him. So, wherever I go he goes. He'll come into my room a couple of times a night to check on me. He'll just come over to me and say, 'Grandma, you OK?' and I'll say, 'Yea.' And he'll say, 'OK, I'll see you later.' "

Martinez is trying to stabilize. She gets up at 3 o'clock every morning to check her phone for messages from monster.com and other job Web sites. She goes each day to the library to send out resumes. But some days are better than others.

"I just try to remain as active as possible, because the anxiety is so overwhelming I can't even describe it," she says. "It's such an ugly feeling."

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## comments

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Recent First



**Susie Buzan (Susie44)** wrote:

I listened to this on my way home from work. I was struck with the utter devastation of this situation as I pulled into my garage. I sat there listening to her speak with such sadness and fear. I wanted so much to help her, but there is nothing I could do. But her story did make me realize as I got out of the car that I have much to be thankful for. I hope she is able to find relief soon. Her family needs her love.

Monday, February 16, 2009 12:34:24 PM

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**Ralph Sierra (northernvirginia)** wrote:

I wish this story included the finish of the on-air broadcast. The reporter said that Martinez's unemployment runs out in x weeks (8?), and she has no idea what she will do after that.

Sunday, February 15, 2009 2:03:51 PM

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**Alison Akers (Skibum)** wrote: