

# Cost of living crisis morphs into a health emergency

Jenny Blyth, 35, has been financially independent her whole adult life and for the past eight years has run a successful small business, Storm in a Teacup Gifts. But this year she was forced to ask her parents for a loan.

Ms Blyth said: "As a woman in her 30s, the shame of having to go to my parents and ask for a handout is profound. I never thought I would find myself in the position where I am on my knees crying because I don't know how to afford my bills or heat our home."

"I'm fortunate enough to be in a position to ask for help, but it makes me feel like a failure and that is a daily struggle. I feel stuck and some days completely hopeless."

She is not alone. A quarter of people struggling to pay their energy bills live with moderate or severe symptoms of depression, according to official data published by the Office for National Statistics. The rate is three times higher than in households who can easily afford gas and electricity.

The cost of living crisis has now triggered a health emergency as households grapple with the physical and mental fallout of huge jumps in energy bills, food prices and housing costs.

The crisis comes in the intermediate aftermath of the pandemic, when successive lockdowns plunged thousands into loneliness. "It feels like it's never ending," said Ms Blyth.

One in six adults experienced moderate to severe symptoms of depression in October this year, compared with one in 10 before the pandemic, according to the ONS.

Almost all, 92pc, of those with some form of depression reported being worried about the rising cost of living.

Doctors and charities have sounded alarm bells over a mental health crisis triggered by soaring inflation and household bills.

Mind, the mental health charity, has recorded a 40pc increase in the number of calls to its helpline in relation to financial worries since last summer, including debt and unemployment.

Sophie Corlett, of the charity, said: "Money troubles and poor mental health have a cyclical relationship and the cost of living crisis has made this worse."

"If you're struggling financially, you're more likely to experience a mental health problem, and if you have a mental health problem, you're

more likely to struggle financially." A survey of 4,266 adults by the ONS found a third had shouldered an increase in their mortgage and rent over the past six months.

Those struggling to pay these costs were twice as likely to suffer from symptoms of depression than those who could easily afford housing.

The economic fallout has pushed many to the brink. Struggling patients have flocked to doctors' surgeries suffering from heightened anxiety, stress and depression.

Dr Anita Raja, a Birmingham-based GP, said her biggest concern was the

impact of high inflation on her patients. She said: "The economic crisis is rapidly turning into a mental health crisis. We are now seeing more patients call in due to stress-related issues, much of which is down to money worries and the cost of living crisis."

Priory, a mental health and addiction support service, is preparing for an "exceptionally busy" 2023 as the looming recession threatens job losses and financial hardship.

The number of people approaching Priory for help with their mental health has surged by 70pc this year, compared with the same period in 2021, and inquiries are 150pc above 2020 levels.

Priory warns a growing number of people are "self-medicating" and drinking as a coping strategy to manage financial worries - requests for help with alcohol addiction have jumped by 55pc compared with last year.

Dr Natasha Bijlani, of the group, said: "Many people's mental health deteriorated during the pandemic and that stress never really went away."

"So the cost of living crisis is proving even more detrimental, with people often feeling a sense of paralysis when making even minor financial decisions. Many of my patients say they experience physical and mental symptoms of stress daily."

Kamila Hawthorne, of the Royal College of GPs, warned doctors were also treating physical conditions linked to the higher cost of living, such as complications from living in a poorly heated home.

Rates of depression are highest among those unable to work because of long-term sickness, unpaid carers and disabled adults, according to the ONS.

Campaigners have warned the unfolding mental health crisis will be felt across all demographics - but especially those living in poverty - with the risk of a surge in suicide rates.

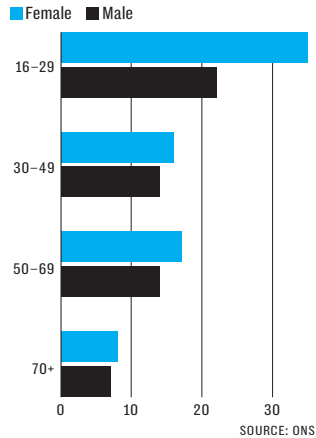
Last month a group of charities, including Mind and Samaritans, penned an open letter to the Prime Minister warning the cost of living crisis was having a significant impact on the mental health of communities up and down the country.

The letter read: "We want to be crystal clear: the first intervention to reduce mental ill health and prevent suicide is to ensure every household has the means to be safe and warm with enough to eat."

Rachel Mortimer

## Younger women most at risk from depression

Share of survey respondents who have moderate to severe symptoms of depression



## THE STRESS FACTOR

# 150%

Rise in inquiries since 2020 to Priory, a support service, for help with mental health