

CONNECTIONS

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Welcome Lori

The Employee Assistance Program would like to welcome Lori Wessel, our newest EAP Specialist. Lori comes to us with many years of EAP experience and she shares more about herself below.

I began my role in November of 2020 with the City of Madison as EAP Specialist, after 26 years at my previous employer. My previous role as an EAP Counselor/Case Manager for an internal and external Employee Assistance Program has prepared me for my position here in many ways. It has provided me with many years of experience with providing 1:1 short term counseling, assessment and referral, developing and presenting presentations and trainings, doing consults with leaders and Critical Incident Response both with business and industry and Emergency Responders.

I acquired my Bachelor's Degree from UW – Green Bay in Psychology and Human Development and my Master's Degree in Guidance and Counseling with a special emphasis in Employee Assistance and Health Promotions in 1998.

I have received advanced training from ICISF in Critical Incident Response with Emergency Responders and Resiliency training with Robert Intveld. I have been performing debriefings and defusings for 20+ years with my previous employer and the local CISM Team.

As a professional in the EAP world I believe that “each and every person struggles at some point in their life. All human beings are interconnected: mind, body and spirit. When disconnect happens (through crisis, trauma, life or circumstances beyond your control) refocus is necessary. I assist people through those struggles by coaching, teaching and guiding that individual through that difficult time in their life.”

Balance is very important no matter what your profession is, even for EA Professionals. That's why I enjoy camping, visiting state and national parks, traveling, crafting, photography, spending time with my family, and cooking and baking.

I'm looking forward to getting to know the City of Madison as well as all of my new co-workers.



Happy New Year City Employees!

This month's *Connections* newsletter features several articles on couple relationships. The EAP consistently finds that relationship issues are the #1 reason for employees to seek assistance and the stress of our current health crisis is not helping.

Our external EAP provider, FEI, reports that the request for couple counseling has increased since the pandemic began. Did you know that couple counseling is included in your EAP benefit? If you would like to discuss this option for yourself and your partner you can call the internal EAP at 266-6561 or you can call FEI directly at 1-800-236-7905.

Also, read about how to support a partner and take care of yourself if your partner is experiencing mental health issues. And review a healthy relationship checklist in order to bring the focus toward what you do want in a relationship instead of what you don't.

Wishing you all well,

~ The EAP Team



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2021

Happy New Year

Pandemic Increases the Need for Couples Counseling

By Elizabeth Lukomski, **FEI Workforce Resilience**

It comes as no surprise that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted marital and romantic relationships. While some couples are finding a renewed sense of closeness and companionship, others are facing tremendous challenges.

As a therapist for FEI Behavioral Health, I know firsthand that many individuals and couples are seeking marital or couples counseling due to the added stresses and tension brought on by COVID-19. Along with the pandemic's health concerns and losses, the need to quarantine has created many additional challenges for couples, including the following:

- Social isolation and loss of support systems
- Lack of privacy and previously used outlets for stress
- Financial hardships
- Stress over medical concerns
- Changes in household and parenting duties
- Disruptions in childcare and children's schooling
- Changes in employment and professional responsibilities
- Spending more time together, often in confined spaces

The pandemic has also exacerbated underlying problems, making it difficult for couples to refrain from being critical or defensive. Legal Templates, a company that provides legal documents, noticed a 34 percent jump in the number of people seeking divorce documents during the first three months after the pandemic's arrival than during the same period last year.

To help reduce the conflict and tension within your relationship, some couples have found the following suggestions helpful:

- Focus on the big picture.
- Maintain open communication and dialogue.
- Try to "keep things light" and look for humor.
- Schedule time to focus on one another and reconnect.
- Make mindful decisions that positively impact your partner and relationship.
- Acknowledge your shared stressors and tension.
- Apologize when needed without letting problems build up or fester.
- Have daily "check-ins" where you discuss your needs.
- Remember the importance of alone time.
- Maintain daily routines to foster predictability and structure.
- Focus on "the little things," including simple gestures of kindness.

This is a stressful time for all of us, and it's important to realize that everyone needs compassion and patience, including ourselves and those closest to us. If you're struggling with relationship difficulties, couples counseling can be a much-needed resource and can often be accessed with an employee assistance program, or EAP.

If you have an FEI EAP, you can receive marital or couples counseling free of charge. Therapists can support both parties in an unbiased and neutral way and help you formulate steps to move forward. Confidential sessions can be facilitated in person or virtually to accommodate current safety protocols.

Keep in mind that if you or someone you know is experiencing domestic abuse, it's important to seek immediate help. The National Domestic Violence Hotline, 1.800.799.SAFE (7233), is accessible 24/7 and reminds us that "everyone deserves healthy relationships."

The City of Madison EAP can help get you started by providing a referral for couple's therapy or talking over different options for you and your partner. Or, you can call FEI directly at 1-800-236-7905.



How to Be Supportive of Your Partner with Mental Illness

by Coleen O'Day, NAMI

Being in a relationship with someone you love can be beautiful. It can also be difficult, as you face the hurdles of everyday life. But if your partner struggles with mental illness, those issues can become much more intense for both of you. Understanding the needs of someone with mental illness is challenging. And you may not know how to support your partner living with mental illness while caring for your own needs, too. Here are a few ways you can achieve that balance.

Understand the Diagnosis

Because of the nature of mental illness, many people can't recognize how much someone may be suffering because their symptoms aren't outwardly apparent. This is why living with mental illness can present unique challenges to daily life, including physical health and relationships. Since symptoms of mental illnesses can range from difficulty concentrating to more serious conditions such as crippling depression, severe anxiety, and hallucinations, it's important to understand your partner's diagnosis and their personal experiences.

Research Support Tactics

Understanding your partner's diagnosis can make it easier to identify how to be there for them when things get tough. For example, if your partner lives with generalized anxiety disorder, experts recommend not glossing over their worries by blindly reassuring them things will turn out okay. Instead, support their development of problem-solving and resilience skills. If your partner expresses anxiety, ask about their specific concerns and listen as they create a plan that addresses them.

Be a Good Listener

One of the best things partners can do is listen to loved ones in an effort to understand their experiences. It can be easy to assume you know what someone else is going through; however, this is usually not the case. Mental illness affects individuals differently, and it's essential to listen to those experiencing it to better understand their perspectives and provide effective support.

Honor Your Relationship Outside of Mental Illness

Mental illness and the symptoms that go along with it can be all-consuming. However, it's important to work on your relationship the way you would if mental illness were not an issue. Continue to spend quality time together, and express your love and admiration for one another. Open, loving communication can deter couples from blaming all problems in a relationship on mental illness and help them address other potential concerns. Many couples benefit from seeing a family therapist, so they can discuss matters with the guidance of a trusted professional.

Practice Self-Care

As the partner of someone with mental illness, your own self-care routines can slip as you potentially take on greater responsibility with household management or child-rearing. But to effectively support your partner, you must take care of yourself. It's important to eat well, exercise and maintain your own interests and passions. Self-care may include seeing a mental health professional or joining a support group for those who also have loved ones diagnosed with mental illness.

As a partner of someone with mental illness, you can be a great source of support. By staying on top of your own health, you can remain engaged, provide empathetic support and guide your loved one toward appropriate professional care. Though you may experience some challenges, remember you're not alone.



Supporting a Partner with Depression

Mental Health Foundation (Used with the permission of MHF)

We asked our supporters for advice on how to support a partner who has depression.

“Be patient with them and try and go with the flow as much as possible. As hard and weird as that sounds.”

Understanding how depression affects your partner can be key to building a healthy, supportive relationship that cares for the mental wellbeing of both partners.

Depression can cause people to withdraw, behave differently or become more irritable. Common symptoms include insomnia, feelings of worthlessness and loss of interest in activities. It can even lead to physical aches and pains.

Living with depression for a longer period of time can take a toll on your partner's levels of energy, motivation and passion. It's important not to take changes personally or as a reflection of your partner's investment in the relationship.

“Keep doing things that you both enjoy.”

Depression, like many mental health problems, can take over your life. It's important to remember and remind your partner that the depression diagnosis is only a part of their identity. They also have many other roles and interests. Being able to fulfil these roles is a big part of recovery.

We know that exercise and staying active can protect our mental health. You may like to suggest going for a walk or visiting your favorite places. Keep trying but don't push too much if they aren't ready to join you.

You may notice gradual changes in their mood, rather than a massive improvement from one moment to the next.

“Be understanding and listen.”

Watching a loved one go through a difficult time may leave you searching for the perfect solution. Practical advice and tips can help, but sometimes rather than trying to 'fix a problem', it's better to listen to your partner. Be a safe place for them to turn to.

Don't dismiss their feelings. Offer hope and remind them of better days and that it's likely that things will improve again.

“Try not to take to heart the negativity around you and make sure you get to have a break.”

Being the main source of support for a partner living with depression can add a lot of pressure on you. It's important to look after yourself and ask for support when you need it.

Opening up conversations to your friends and families and getting them involved usually makes a big difference in tackling the stigma and building a circle of support for both of you.

Good communication with your partner is very important – remember that your needs and opinions should be met and respected too.

“Get educated and encourage professional help.”

Gaining knowledge will help you guide your partner through their depression, but gently encouraging them to seek out professional help does not mean you have failed. Rather, understand that your partner may need care that you don't have the tools to provide.

“Let them know that you love them no less because of it.”

Living with depression can be exhausting and isolating. It helps to know that someone cares for and supports you, no matter what.

Cultivating Wellness Course

presented by Arlyn Gonzalez

This is an interactive course aimed at exploring what it means to be resilient. Through a series of lectures, polls, and small group discussions, participants will develop and better understand concepts of resiliency, emotional intelligence, and happiness. Participants will be asked to engage in discussions around these topics and will be provided with the option to further cultivate these skills through exercises outside of the course. As a result you will leave with increased self-awareness, a plan for how to improve your well-being, increase your resiliency, and be happier.

This is a 4-part course offered on 2/17, 2/24, 3/3, and 3/10, 2021.

Visit the [Professional Development page](#) on EmployeeNet for registration information.

Financial Advice for Couples

Disagreements about how to handle finances are common in relationships so it's important to carve out time to make a plan that works for both partners before the problem becomes overwhelming. To help you navigate this, here are some resources:

- **Financial Advice Married Couples Should Not Ignore, [thebalance.com](https://www.thebalance.com)**
- **GreenPath Financial Wellness**
- **Dane County UW-Extension Financial Education Center**
- **FEI Financial Resources** (user name *Madison*)
- Many banks and credit unions offer complimentary financial advice to their account holders

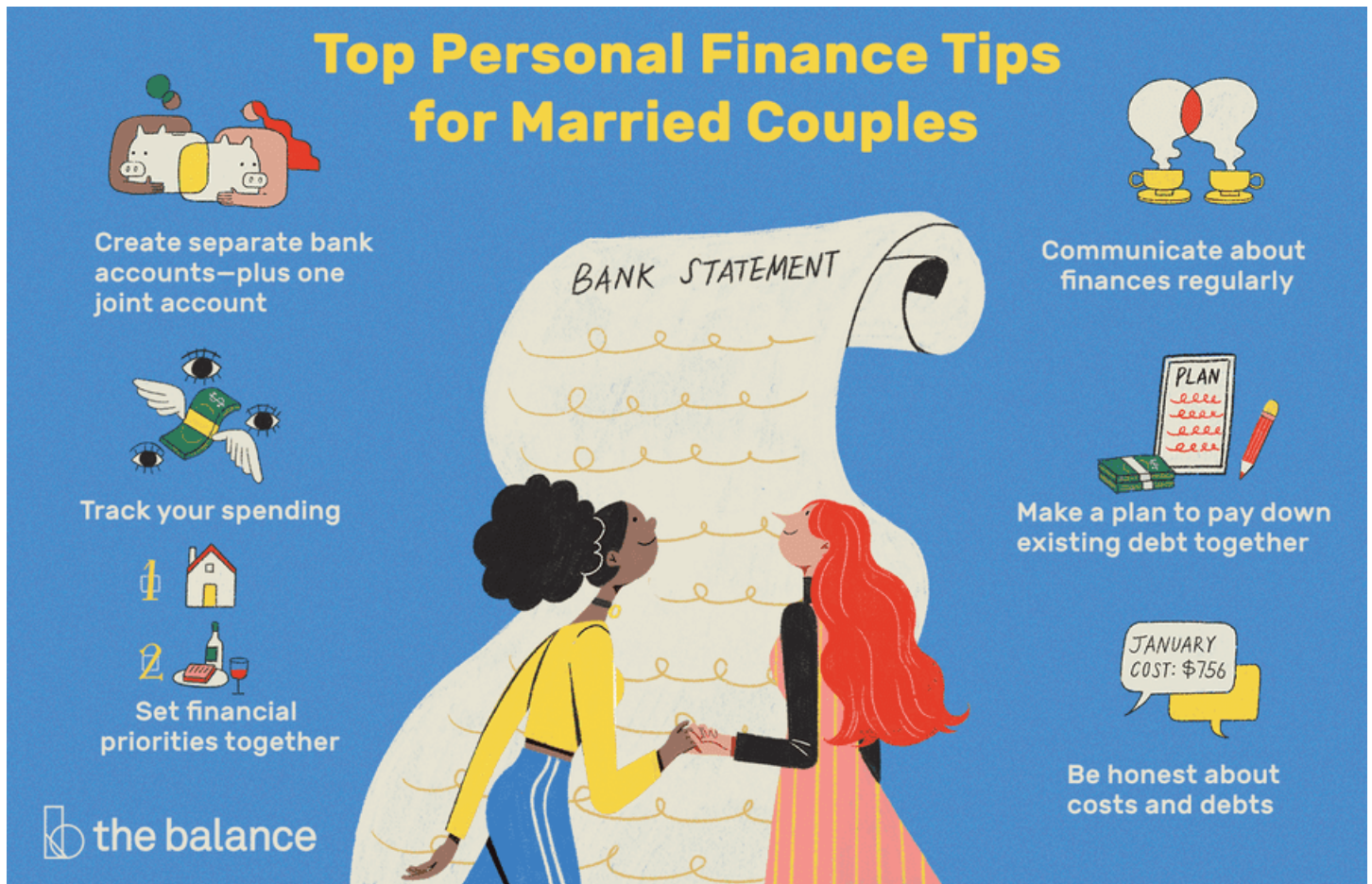


Image by Jiaqi Zhou © The Balance 2020

*Thanks for reading,
we hope you found the information useful!*

**You can reach any of us by calling the
EAP Office at (608) 266-6561**

**External Available 24/7:
FEI Workforce Resilience (800) 236-7905**

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