

# CONNECTIONS

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## Trauma Is Not an Excuse

By Katherine Cullen MFA, LMSW, **Psychology Today** (Used with the author's permission)

*It may be an explanation. But it's not a free pass to harm others.*

Trauma is any experience that overwhelms our ability to cope and undermines our sense of safety. Trauma can inspire powerlessness and hopelessness relative to our capacity to defend ourselves. It can rob us of the belief in our ability to heal, trust, live, and love as we once did, before a traumatic experience occurred.

Experiences of trauma can lead to trauma-related disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. Trauma can be collective (experienced by a group of persons) or individual (experienced by one). It can be episodic (happening every so often), isolated (happening once), or chronic (unabating). It can even be vicarious (e.g., by empathically engaging with the trauma of others).

But not everyone who has experienced trauma goes on to experience a trauma-related disorder. In fact, some research suggests that over half of all individuals who experience trauma go on to positively adapt and grow in the wake of their adversity—a phenomenon called post-traumatic growth (or PTG).

What's more, many studies estimate that the vast majority of us (over 70 percent, according to a survey of nearly 70,000 people in 24 countries) are exposed to at least one major trauma (think: witnessing death or serious injury, unexpectedly losing a loved one, being mugged, being in a life-threatening automobile accident, or experiencing a life-threatening illness or injury) in our lifetime. And yet the global prevalence of PTSD is only a fraction of that—at most, 20 percent of people, according to some research; though some studies suggest it's less than 4 percent. As psychologist George Bonanno has argued, the most common response to trauma is actually resilience.



Trauma is not, therefore, an excuse for perpetuating harm and suffering, nor a get-out-of-jail-free card for causing emotional or physical pain to others. Trauma may help explain why someone is primed to think, feel, behave, or react in certain manners or in certain contexts. But having experienced trauma is by no means a justification for harmful behavior—and no amount of trauma exempts a traumatized person from being held accountable if and when they hurt others.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2.



Season's Greetings City Employees,

Welcome to EAP's final quarterly newsletter of 2022! We hope that you will find something of interest among the variety of topics we have selected:

- Trauma Is Not An Excuse
- The Impact of Quiet Quitting and Firing
- 3 Ways to Manage Emotionally Abusive Adult Child
- 5 Greetings When the Holidays Don't Feel Happy
- Reference card for managers: Tips for talking to an employee with a mental health concern
- Workplace Mental Health & Well-Being Guide
- All One Health on-demand webinar: Psychological Safety
- New! Cultural Considerations web page on the EAP web site

Don't hesitate to call us if you are struggling, this can be a difficult time of year and we encourage you to take care of yourself! Just let us know how we can help, our contact info is at the bottom of this page.

Be well,

~ The EAP Team



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Consider the following examples of individuals “using” their trauma in such a way:

- An adult woman tries to shirk blame for cheating on her devastated partner by stating she was sexually assaulted in college, and that this causes her to not want to get close to any one person.
- An adult man argues he cannot possibly be held responsible for emotionally abusing and manipulating women because the abuse he incurred in childhood has trained him to treat women in such a heinous manner.
- A person caught in a web of their own lies tries to distract from the betrayal and harm their lies have caused by portraying themselves as irreparably broken by trauma and therefore innocently unable to predict the negative outcomes of their lies.
- A person accused of wrongdoing claims to feel triggered by past traumas anytime they are confronted with their actions, so as to avoid accepting responsibility for what they’ve done.

All of these individuals may indeed have been historically wronged—many to the point of feeling destroyed by whatever was done to them. But this does not justify their own destruction, betrayal, use of unwarranted physical force, taking advantage of, or emotional terrorization of others.

To utilize trauma as an excuse for harmful behavior is not only to avoid responsibility for one’s actions but also to forestall healing and growth from trauma by clinging to an identity of victimhood.

What’s more, having been traumatized does not automatically predispose someone towards traumatizing others. Among individuals diagnosed with PTSD, the prevalence of violence ranges from 5 percent to roughly 12 percent—higher (about 35 percent) if substance misuse is a factor. The vast majority of individuals meeting the diagnostic criteria for trauma-related stress disorders do not actively harm others, even when grappling with alcohol or drug dependence. It is therefore safe to assume that the majority of individuals who have experienced trauma but do not develop a trauma-related stress disorder are at equally low (if not even lower) risks of causing harm.

None of this is to say that healing from trauma is an easy and simple process for everyone. Nor is it to negate the very real and damaging effects trauma can have on our ability to modulate our emotions, accurately appraise situations, relate to and become close with others, or maintain positive beliefs about the world, ourselves, and the inherent goodness of humanity.

But we need to hold people accountable for their actions, and not excuse damaging behavior on the basis that a guilty party has experienced past trauma. Those of us who have experienced trauma owe it to ourselves and each other to take ownership of our behavior. Only in this way can we become a place where the suffering we have experienced at the hands of others ceases to proliferate and mutate.

We can have compassion for ourselves, for what we have been through, and also exhibit the self-control necessary to refrain from perpetuating whatever pain we ourselves have been filled with by others. We can do this by self-regulation strategies—from deep breathing and meditation to intense exercise, talking it out with a trusted friend or therapist, expressive writing or art-making, removing ourselves from a triggering situation, moderating our intake of mind-altering substances, and making it a priority to get better sleep.

We can also do this by engaging in therapies proven to promote recovery from trauma. Think: Eye movement desensitization therapy (EMDR), cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), prolonged exposure (PE) and cognitive processing therapy (CPT), somatic experiencing (SE), and mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR).

But we cannot move forward and heal if we continue to hide behind the shield of our victimhood—or, in the worst of cases, use that victimhood as a weapon to hurt others as bad or worse than we ourselves have been hurt.

*Linked references available in the original article on **Psychology Today**.*



# The Impact of Quiet Quitting and Quiet Firing

By City of Madison EAP

We recently noticed a trend on social media outlets that addresses and normalizes conversations about a couple of common practices in the workplace now named Quiet Quitting and Quiet Firing. There has also been a lot of mixed reactions and opposing opinions to these concepts. We believe that whether we agree with the practices or not, we cannot deny the reality of a workforce impacted by both of them even long before these terms were coined. In this newsletter, we thought we would spend some time initiating the conversation about what these terms and practices entail while encouraging you to look at your unit and explore if you can identify signs of either as well as what may have led to them being present within your department.

Caroline Castrillon, a contributor from Forbes, explains that Quiet Quitting “refers to abandoning the notion that you must go above and beyond at work to be happy. While you’re still performing your duties, this trend acknowledges that work isn’t your life.” In other words, we can think of Quiet Quitting as an attempt to regain a healthy balance between personal and professional needs that challenges the notion of the very common, “other duties as assigned”. It also may be seen as an attempt to restructure our priorities and explore ways in which we can give more of ourselves to other basic human needs like social connection, fun and hobbies, and anything that the individual decides to incorporate more of into their life. Our society, for far too long, has been encouraging productivity even to levels that deny our mental and physical capacity limits. It is no surprise that these terms are gaining so much popularity in our, somewhat, post-pandemic era where the workforce experienced such a revolutionizing restructure allowing more room for being human.

On the other hand, we have also heard about Quiet Firing, which Castrillon defines as “a phenomenon in which employers demoralize unwanted workers to the point that they decide to quit.” The Forbes article also offers the perspective of Paul Lewis, Chief Customer Officer at Adzuna, who describes it as “employers treating their staff in such a way it forces them to leave instead of directly laying them off.” As we stated above, in spite of these terms feeling relatively new, there is some research conducted by [LinkedIn News poll](#), which shines light on the prevalence of Quiet Firing. Castrillon shares the findings that “over 80% of the over 20,000 respondents admitted to facing it themselves or seeing it firsthand at work.” It is critical for the health and functioning of our organization, our units, and our employees, that we become skilled at identifying signs of this practice and challenge it considering that, as Lewis points out “this term may simply just be a new moniker for a toxic work environment and workplace bullying.”

The connection between both terms seems quite evident, as well. For example, if a workplace is Quiet Firing an employee and/or has been doing so for a while, it makes sense that the employee would decide to engage in Quiet Quitting. This also is incredibly common amongst employees from underrepresented communities who regardless of being stellar, highly skilled, and highly qualified, tend to be passed on for promotions and opportunities to showcase their leadership. When an employee’s efforts to go above and beyond for their employer, who even unintentionally may be Quiet Firing them, are not appreciated, valued, and honored, their morale and loyalty to the agency decrease. This, consequently, leads to their Quiet Quitting.

So if you would like to learn more about these terms and practices, we invite you to conduct your own research and also check out the following two articles, one from [Forbes](#) and one from [The Atlantic](#), with very relevant and helpful information.

## 10 Signs Your Boss Is Guilty Of Quiet Firing

Caroline Castrillon Contributor ©  
I write about career, entrepreneurship and women's advancement.

Follow

## ‘The Cure for Burnout Is Not Self-Care’

Amelia Nagoski discusses quiet quitting.

By Caroline Mimbs Nyce



## 3 Ways to Manage an Emotionally Abusive Adult Child

By Jeffrey Bernstein Ph.D., **Psychology Today** (Used with the author's permission)

Being emotionally abused and manipulated by an adult child takes a huge mental health toll. While coaching parents of struggling adult children, I have heard countless stories from parents who are emotionally distraught.

There is a saying that, “Hurt people, hurt people.” I feel compassion for adult children who are hurting and I also feel compassion for their parents. Adult children may be struggling for many reasons, including mental health issues, addictions, learning differences, ADHD, traumatic past events, and deep-seated pain from their childhoods.

As I explain in my book, **10 Days to a Less Defiant Child**, to truly function well in life, children of all ages need to learn two crucial skills: calming down and solving problems. A calm, firm, non-controlling approach empowers parents to “switch into the emotion coach lane” when they feel stuck. This works very well for managing reactive adult children. When adult children don't learn to calm themselves and problem-solve, life gets quite stressful and overwhelming for them.

That said, as a parent of a hurting adult child, allowing yourself to wear a “kick me” sign is not going to help them or you. In fact, it just makes things worse. The parents of abusive and manipulative adult children who contact me for coaching commonly report feeling the following:

- **Highly Anxious:** Because you never know when manipulative interactions will occur.
- **Exceedingly Remorseful:** Yes, you made some mistakes and those have likely overshadowed how you also tried really hard to learn from those mistakes, yet they are thrown in your face.
- **Exasperated and Exhausted:** From walking on eggshells and anticipating hurtful attacks consisting of distortions and the rewriting of history.
- **Alone and Isolated:** Because it seems so many other families have adult children who are more respectful and appreciative of their parents.

Following are three signs of emotional abuse experienced by parents of adult children that I often encounter when I coach them to set better boundaries:

- **Over-The-Top Blame.** Sadly, many of my parent clients actually believe they are solely at fault for an adult child's lack of success in sustaining independence. Perhaps you distortedly think, “Maybe if I just tried harder or did this instead of that, things would be different.” This blame-guilt cycle is sparked when your adult child persistently blames you for his or her problems and refuses to accept responsibility for their struggles and issues. Adult children who think this way are laden with distortions and use their parents as an outlet to vent their anger.
- **Merciless Manipulation.** Struggling adult children with distorted views may use whatever tactics they can muster to make parents feel they “owe” them and so must indefinitely support them. In many cases, I hear about struggling adult children who unfairly sling guilt at parents or even make threats of self-harm or suicide. You wish you could just return to the days of their youth when things were better, so you look past the manipulation and cling to the idea that things will turn around.
- **Toxic Put-downs.** Criticism from struggling adult children is common. They bring up how you seemingly treat their siblings better, rip on your spending habits, or criticize your past choices. When you try to confront your adult child about it, you are met with gaslighting—questioning your memory of the incident or the past in general, trying to make you second-guess yourself, or telling you that you're “always overreacting” or are just “crazy.”

If you recognize some or any of these behaviors in your relationship with an adult child, don't accept them as normal. These behaviors are common in emotionally abusive relationships. Just because you are not being physically harmed doesn't mean that the abuse isn't taking its toll.



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### 3 Helpful Strategies for Parents

1. **Know Your Value.** If you care enough to read this post, then you likely did your best as a parent. In fact, I suggest you make a list of all you have done—and do—for your struggling adult child. (Do not show this list to your adult child. It is for you, not them.) This list is going to be your truth—your shield of protective armor. All those years of school functions, sports, music lessons, camp sign-ups, other activities you supported, educational support, love and affection, and caring and listening—they are all yours and can't be taken away.
2. **Take Off Your “Kick Me” Sign.** Are you unwittingly, or even wittingly (because you just feel so worn down) wearing a “Kick Me” sign, thereby enabling mistreatment? One way to keep knowing your value is to stop setting yourself up to be further abused and manipulated. In my 33-plus years of coaching parents of adult children to help restore boundaries, improve communication, and gain a much-desired sense of emotional balance, I have seen too many parents of adult children metaphorically wear “Kick Me” signs. What I mean by this is that your adult child's frustration and shame over the failure to launch comes out sideways, directed at you as emotional abuse.
3. **Become Your Adult Child's Boundaries Coach.** Setting boundaries with your adult child may seem impossible at this point because you hopelessly feel that the ship set sail way too long ago. Please don't feel that way. There is no such thing as false hope when it comes to managing how an adult child treats you. There is only true hope, if you can recognize what is going on, take off your “Kick Me” sign, and do things differently going forward. Saying, for example, “Wouldn't we both benefit more from having a calm, constructive conversation about this?” is a lot healthier than getting sucked in to manipulation. And remember, even if your adult child does not acknowledge a healthy boundary at the time, you are still modeling and teaching, which is what great coaches do.

Linked references available in the [original article on Psychology Today](#).



As we enter the holiday season, it can be helpful to recognize that you aren't alone if you have some painful family relationships. We hope this doesn't apply to you but we thought we would share some information that may seem relevant in some family scenarios. Please take care of yourself and know that you are doing your best!

We also encourage you to review some previous holiday editions of *Connections* that may offer tips for your particular holiday stressors:

- [December 2021](#)
- [November 2021](#)
- [December 2020](#)
- [November 2020](#)
- [December 2019](#)



## IT TAKES A VILLAGE

### Tips for Raising Resilient Kids

#### Tip #13 – Build feelings of competence and mastery

Acknowledge your child's strengths and build on them. Recognize their effort when they do something difficult or brave. When children feel competent and have a sense of mastery they are more likely to take risks and better handle future challenges.

# 5 Greetings for When the Holidays Don't Feel Happy

By Alli Spotts-De Lazzar, MA, LMFT, LPCC, CEDS-S, *Psychology Today* (Used with the author's permission)

## *Does the positivity of “happy holidays” feel uncomfortable?*

Although “Happy holidays!” is usually intended as a kind, warm wish to another human being, it doesn't always feel that way to receive or give. For someone in emotional pain, “Happy holidays!” can:

- Seem like a command they've failed to fulfill: “Be happy, it's the holidays!”
- Be experienced as emotionally negating (similar to someone saying to you, “Cheer up!” or “Smile!” while you're on the brink of tears).
- Remind the individual that they don't fit in with their peers' (or the world's) holiday cheer.
- Cause the person to fake cheer to cover their suffering, which tends to deplete precious energy.
- Be a painful reminder of what the person does not feel and wishes they did.

If any of the above describes your experience, hear this: You are not alone.

Your energy is probably limited and stretched right now, and it's going to be important that you protect it where possible. Granted, you may not be able to avoid the holidays amplifying your emotional pain. Still, there's a less-taxing way to get through the barrage of “Happy holidays!” you're expected to provide. And you can still be as graceful and gracious as you'd like.

## **Alternate holiday greetings that can help you take care of yourself**

Align your words with your intentions. In the end, it'll probably take a lot less effort than trying to maintain a faked appearance of holiday cheer. Here are five examples of how.

### **1. “Season's greetings.”**

If you simply want to say hello during the season, “Season's greetings” is pretty neutral and still thoughtful.

### **2. “I wish you [insert something specific here, such as ‘peace’ or ‘health’].”**

Shift to saying, “I wish you [insert specific kind wish].” Completing this sentence with even “happy holidays” can feel better than saying only “Happy holidays!” Why? It's specific, allows honesty, and focuses on your desire for the listener without reinforcing expectations: “I wish this for you.”

If you don't believe me, take a few seconds and try saying these in your mind.

- “I wish you [insert something specific]”
- “Happy holidays!”



Did your body have any responses?

No matter how sad or unwell you feel during the season, you may still want to wish others happiness, joy, love, whatever. This can be a sincere way to do it.

### **3. “Meaningful holidays to you.”**

Personally, I like saying, “Meaningful holidays to you.” (No, that's not because of my book or this blog. My people in my office and friends know I started saying it many years ago.) It matches my intention of wishing that someone experiences meaning, despite whatever joyful, neutral, stressful, or painful experiences the holidays bring.

### **4. Keep it simple, and stick to non-seasonal greetings.**

It's also okay not to say anything holiday-related at all. “Hello” and “Hi, how are you?” are solid any time of the year.

### **5. Find something that works for you.**

“Peaceful holidays to you” and “Warm wishes” often express what I'm hoping to communicate to someone. What would you like to give as a holiday message? If that's difficult to determine, flip it. What would feel better to receive as a holiday wish? Answering that will probably lead you to what you can say that's authentic, precise, and congruent.

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## The bottom line

A lot can get in the way of experiencing a happy holiday. Maybe you're grieving a loss this season. Your mental health took a dip. You want to give gifts, but Covid or life took away your choices, options, or money. You struggle with depression. And so much more.

Our words matching our intentions and experiences matter to our overall wellness—even in something as seemingly minor as a holiday greeting. Repeated, inauthentic, and uncomfortable interactions with people can slowly chip away at self-image and overall wellness. Thus, especially if you are already down, it's in your best interest to find a way to graciously say what you mean and mean what you say. Besides, you never know who is also affected negatively by "Happy holidays!" Your greeting may help them, too.

There won't be a holiday wish revolution immediately, but you and I can change our own little corners. Just wait until you notice that your precise wording caught someone off guard and elicited their thoughtfulness. "Oh wow. I like that you say that." It can be such a connecting—instead of disconnecting—experience. Most importantly, you can take better care of yourself during this season that emphasizes "happy" as if it's automatic for everyone.

Wishing you each a season of meaningful experiences.

# LEADERSHIP Matters

### Five Essentials for Workplace Mental Health & Well-Being

Centered on the worker voice and equity, these five Essentials support workplaces as engines of well-being. Each Essential is grounded in two human needs, shared across industries and roles.

### Components

Creating a plan with all workers to enact these components can help reimagine workplaces as engines of well-being.

Centered on  
**Worker Voice and Equity**

- Protection from Harm**
  - Prioritize workplace physical and psychological safety
  - Enable adequate rest
  - Normalize and support mental health
  - Operationalize DEIA\* norms, policies, and programs
- Connection & Community**
  - Create cultures of inclusion and belonging
  - Cultivate trusted relationships
  - Foster collaboration and teamwork
- Work-Life Harmony**
  - Provide more autonomy over how work is done
  - Make schedules as flexible and predictable as possible
  - Increase access to paid leave
  - Respect boundaries between work and non-work time
- Mattering at Work**
  - Provide a living wage
  - Engage workers in workplace decisions
  - Build a culture of gratitude and recognition
  - Connect individual work with organizational mission
- Opportunity for Growth**
  - Offer quality training, education, and mentoring
  - Foster clear, equitable pathways for career advancement
  - Ensure relevant, reciprocal feedback

\*Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Accessibility

Office of the  
U.S. Surgeon General

The U.S. Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health & Well-Being

10

The Office of the U.S. Surgeon General has made available an excellent guide called **Workplace Mental Health & Well-Being** which further explores these five essentials of workplace well-being.

# PRINTABLE MANAGER POSTCARD

## 11 TIPS FOR TALKING TO AN EMPLOYEE WITH A MENTAL HEALTH CONCERN



Has an employee ever approached you with a mental health concern? Here are 11 tips to start the conversation.

1. Feel more prepared by educating yourself about mental health concerns at [mhanational.org/MentalHealthInfo](https://mhanational.org/MentalHealthInfo).
2. Ensure you are in a mentally healthy headspace before offering support to others.
3. Ask the employee with a mental health concern appropriate, open-ended questions, such as:
  - "How are you feeling today?"
  - "Why do you think you feel this way?"
  - "How do you feel this might be affecting your work?"
  - "How can I help?"
4. Actively listen with your complete attention on the speaker.
5. Resist thinking about how you should respond next or offer advice or solutions.
6. Validate their experiences and express your understanding back to them.
7. If comfortable and appropriate, relate to them on a personal level and share your own experiences.
8. Refer them to your organization's resources or online mental health screening at [screening.mhanational.org](https://screening.mhanational.org).
9. Always respect the employee's need for and right to privacy if they disclose a mental health condition, and be aware of your personal biases against mental health conditions.
10. Know your comfort level when supporting other people. You are not expected to be a mental health professional, but you can still help others by opening the conversation and referring them to the appropriate resources.
11. Educate yourself on the process for asking HR to help with providing accommodations or navigating benefits.

## UNDERSTANDING STRESS AND BURNOUT

A certain amount of stress is healthy and is intended to help your body react quickly and effectively to a high-pressure situation. Employees can learn to manage stress, such as practicing healthy habits and maintaining a healthy life-work balance. However, chronic stress, where you're perpetually reacting with the fight-or-flight response, can pose serious concerns for your physical and mental health and lead to burnout.

**What is burnout?**  
The World Health Organization defines burnout as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed and is a condition specific to the workplace.<sup>1</sup> As a people manager, understand, observe, and discuss strategies to reduce burnout risk with your employees. Here are three primary symptoms of burnout to watch for in workers, and potential solutions:

Burnout Symptom	Emotional Exhaustion	Reduced Self-Efficacy	Cynicism
<b>Definition</b>	Feeling emotionally drained, having depleted energy, or feeling restless	Lacking confidence in personal ability to complete tasks or exert control over motivation successfully	Feeling less empathy, more resentful, or even hatred towards work activities or peer interactions
<b>Question(s) to ask yourself or your peer</b>	Am I feeling more irritable toward my peers? Am I frustrated by situations that did not bother me before?	Do I feel like I am performing well? Do I feel like my work meaningfully contributes to my organization? Do I feel like I am stuck in my job?	Do I care less about my efforts? Am I feeling more resentful towards my team or manager?
<b>Potential solution</b>	Take a vacation (or staycation) to rest, recover, and recharge from workplace stressors	Evaluate, adapt, or reduce workload in collaboration with a manager	Consider an adaptation or transition to a new or existing project, team, manager, department, or position

1. "Burn-out an 'Occupational Phenomenon': International Classification of Diseases." World Health Organization, World Health Organization, <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>.





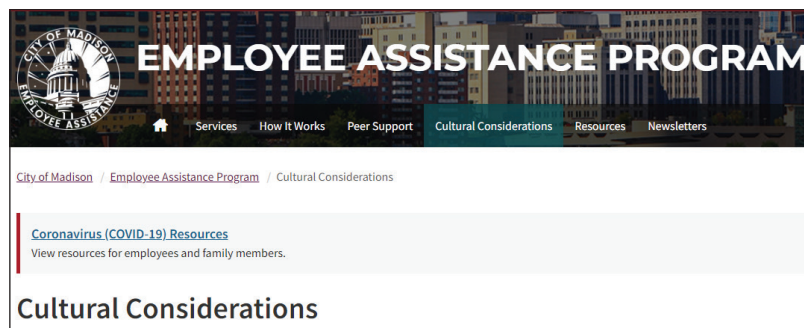
We invite you to view this on-demand webinar about how to create psychological safety for your staff and there is a feature that allows the presentation to play in the corner of your screen while you tend to other tasks.

**To access this training you only need to enter your name and email.** You can also check out other on-demand webinars provided by our external EAP by logging into your account on the **FEI member portal** (visit our **web site** for details on how to do so).

## EAP Updates

### *Introducing Cultural Considerations*

The **EAP web site** now features a new web page called **Cultural Considerations**. Our goal in creating this page is to provide information and resources related to diverse cultural identities and the ways that intersectionality impacts our worldview. The resources and articles we have collected are related not only to mental health but also to the medical, legal, political, and creative aspects of diverse identities. Our hope is to provide many avenues to explore that are relevant for the identities you hold and we welcome feedback and suggested additions to this web page – just email us at [eap@cityofmadison.com](mailto:eap@cityofmadison.com) with anything you'd like to share.



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

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To learn more about your external EAP services, please contact FEI at 1-800-236-7905 or sign in to **FEI/AllOneHealth member portal** (for instructions on how to create your account, please visit the **EAP web site**).