

CONNECTIONS

APRIL, 2023

VOLUME 9, ISSUE 2

LEADERSHIP *Matters*

4 Ways to Support Neurodiverse Employees Who Work Remotely

Open Access Government (Used with the editor's permission)

The brain is a complex organ, and everyone's brain functions differently. However, there are two broad categories: neurotypical, and neurodivergent.

Neurotypical refers to people whose brains function in the way that society expects. In contrast, neurodivergent is a term used to refer to those whose brain functions differently to this so-called 'typical', and covers **people who have well-known conditions such as dyslexia, autism or ADHD. Around 15% of all people in the UK are neurodivergent.**

Unfortunately, the neurodivergent community has always experienced lower employment rates than the neurotypical community, often due to a lack of understanding or adjustment. Fortunately, remote working is helping change this, as it removes the pressure of being in a heavily people-focused environment, such as an office.

This new way of working creates more employment opportunities for neurodivergent employees, which is also **beneficial for employers** and society as a whole. But as with all employees, correct support is needed in order to help them thrive. Here, we look at four **ways employers can support a neurodiverse workforce.**



CONTINUED ON PAGE 2.



Greetings City Employees!

Happy Spring! We have some staff changes to let you know about this quarter, in case you haven't already heard.

After 40 years in the Social Work profession and 18 of those years managing the City's Employee Assistance Program, Tresa Martinez is retiring on May 1st. During this time, she has continued to develop a program that has become a model for many others. Tresa has been a tireless advocate for City of Madison employees for many years and she truly cares about those she serves. We congratulate her on a very successful career, we appreciate all she has done to support our staff, and we wish her well as she embarks on her next adventure. At the same time, we welcome Arlyn Gonzalez as the new EAP Manager! Arlyn has been with us as an EAP counselor for over 3 years, she is a licensed clinical social worker, and she is very enthusiastic about the many ways that this program supports our employees. Tresa is leaving us in very capable hands!

Our Program Assistant, Sherri Amos, is also planning to retire on June 9th so we are in the process of hiring her replacement as well as fill the position of EAP Specialist that Arlyn's promotion leaves vacant.

Stay tuned for more EAP updates in our next quarterly newsletter, but in the meantime please continue to reach out to us for counseling and referrals, consultations about workplace issues, and critical incident response or grief sessions for your work group.

Be well,

~ The EAP Team



CITY OF MADISON EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM
2300 S. Park St., Suite 111
Madison, WI 53703

Tresa Martinez, EAP Manager: (608) 266-6561

Arlyn Gonzalez, EAP Specialist: (608) 266-6561

Provides bilingual EAP services in English and Spanish

Mary Eldridge, EAP Specialist: (608) 266-6561

Provides bilingual EAP services in English and Spanish

Sherri Amos, Confidential Program Support: (608) 266-6561

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1.

1. Provide assistive technology to support different ways of working

A lot of tasks that many people take for granted in the workplace may be challenging for those with additional needs. For example, employees with dyslexia may find creating long documents on strict deadlines difficult. This is understandable and easy to circumvent, thanks to assistive technology, which may allow the employee to dictate the work instead of typing it.

Assistive technology can accommodate many of your neurodiverse employees' special needs and preferences. Have a one-to-one conversation with your employee – they'll be able to work with you to find out the best option for them.

2. Support varying communication techniques

Neurodiverse employees also have varying needs and preferences in the way they communicate. For example, dyslexic employees may prefer audio and video calls in order to avoid written communication. In contrast, employees with Asperger's may find video calls challenging and instead prefer texting and chatting.

Clear communication in the workplace is important, regardless of the situation. It is important to discuss your neurodiverse employees' communication needs with them and adapt. Don't be afraid to try something new – you may find that you need to adjust your processes.

3. Maintain routine & structure

A more flexible schedule is often one of the main benefits of remote working. However, a dynamic workplace is not ideal for some neurodiverse employees. For example, employees with ADHD take some time to get used to how things function at work, and keeping up with regular changes would be difficult. This is why establishing a long-term routine and structure is advisable.

However, this doesn't mean a rigid routine for everyone involved. Instead, every neurodiverse employee should have a routine that suits their unique needs and preferences as long as they meet the company's productivity expectations.

4. Practice conciseness & forward-thinking

As mentioned, clear communication in the workplace is important. Neurodiverse employees interpret messages differently, depending on the medium used. For example, thoughts may be lost in translation when using written messages. This is why it is important to utilise the employees' preferred communication channels and be as clear and concise as possible.

Introducing sudden changes to ongoing projects can also be confusing for neurodiverse employees, hurting their productivity and derailing your schedule. Being forward-thinking and planning for everything to expect during the project will help create a more stable working environment, giving your neurodiverse employees enough time to complete their projects.

Supporting a neurodiverse remote workforce is possible, and it can benefit your company in many ways. Ultimately, it is important to understand your neurodiverse employees' unique needs and preferences and implement solutions to accommodate them.



Supportive Workplace Culture

Mental Health America's **Workplace Mental Health Toolkit**

Cultivate Supportive People Managers

What is a single important action an employer can take to improve employee satisfaction and well-being at work? Invest in developing supportive and emotionally intelligent people managers. Research shows a consistent and strong relationship between managerial styles and employee stress and well-being. However, only 36% of employees feel they can rely on manager support. Employees who do not feel supported by their manager experience increased stress levels and feelings of isolation and job dissatisfaction. Employees also report high rates of absenteeism (33%) and increased mental health concerns (63%). Employers can help promote positive relationships between managers and workers through the following means.

Encourage fair and effective management practices.

As a first step, employers should establish expectations for how managers check in with employees and foster positive working relationships. Mentally healthy management practices can be integrated into an overall people management strategy, listed in the employee handbook, discussed during management training, and practiced or modeled at all levels of the organization. Managers should consider incorporating the following practices:

- Check in with direct reports regularly on a recurring schedule that works for both parties;
- Evaluate the direct report's workload regularly and assist where possible;
- Set clear and realistic expectations about work responsibilities;
- Be approachable with open-door and flexible policies;
- Understand how employees express signs of acute stress or burnout;
- Provide emotional support to employees;
- Provide employees with autonomy over their work;
- Build trust, respect, and collaboration as part of a manager-employee relationship;
- Ensure that the manager is checking in with themselves and their direct supervisor regularly.

Provide management training.

Employees who excel in one position may not excel in a managerial position without the proper training and guidance. Effective and supportive people management is a skill set that can be taught through training. Workplaces should invest in management training to ensure employees perform well in their new roles. See the "Mental Health Training Resources" section in the toolkit for suggested training.

Include shared decision-making in performance evaluations.

Instead of standard performance evaluations, employers can leverage the relationship between a manager and a direct report through shared decision making or a 360-review process in which multiple stakeholders are providing feedback for improvement. Both the manager and direct report should have the opportunity to give bidirectional feedback and discuss professional goals collaboratively.

Encourage mentorship.

A mentor should serve as a trusted counselor or guide, provide expertise to less experienced individuals, and build a relationship based on communication. Treating a management position as a mentorship opportunity can help the manager focus on an employee's strengths, build a strong relationship, and help the employee grow professionally. In addition to people managers, board members, members from an alumni association, or peers can also serve as mentors.

Educate managers about emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence (EQ) is the ability to manage your own emotions and understand the emotions of people around you. EQ has five key elements: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. People with high EQ can identify how they are feeling, what those feelings mean, and how those emotions impact their behavior and, in turn, other people. In the workplace, leaders must be self-aware, view things objectively, understand their strengths and weaknesses, be culturally competent and responsive, and act with humility.





EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM RESPONDING TO CRITICAL INCIDENTS IN THE WORKPLACE

Have you experienced a stressful, perhaps traumatic event in the workplace? As a supervisor or manager do you feel prepared to handle and support your staff through these abnormal events? Join us to learn more about critical incidents, how they present in the workplace, normal reactions your employees may experience, and your role as a supervisor. We will share resources, skills, and information to better prepare you for handling these events in a trauma-informed way that will leave your staff feeling supported and will provide a smoother transition back to normal operations.

Learning Objectives:

- » Discussing what a critical incident looks like and how it impacts employees
- » Increasing awareness about supervisor's/manager's role in addressing the critical incident and supporting employees who were impacted
- » Learning about resources to assist when a critical incident occurs and how EAP will be involved in the response.

Note: Because this course is interactive, we request that you join from a computer or smart device. This course incorporates break-out sessions and we encourage your full participation in the virtual space.

**Wednesday May 10, 2023: 10-11:30 am or
Thursday November 16, 2023: 9-10:30 am**



Registration required.
Questions? Call the EAP Office at (608) 266-6561.





IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Is Playing Violent Video Games Related to Teens' Mental Health?

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

New research indicates that video games are not as bad as we once feared.

With so many kids still home this year, and an apparent increase in the number of teens and adults playing video games, it seems appropriate to re-examine the evidence on whether aggression in video games is associated with problems for adolescents or society. A special issue of **Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking** published in January 2021 did just that. As a parent of three—aware of how video games can suck kids in—and a psychologist working at a social innovation lab that has been a leader in the games for health movement, I'm eager to look at studies that examine teens' violent video game play and any effects later on in life. I asked, in the ongoing conversation about whether playing games like Fortnite makes teens more aggressive, depressed, or anxious, what do we now know?

After a few decades of research in this area, the answer is not definitive. There was a slew of studies in the early 2000s showing a link between violent video game play and aggressive behavior, and a subsequent onslaught of studies showing that the aggression was very slight and likely due to competition rather than the violent nature of the games themselves. For example, studies showed that people got just as aggressive when they lost at games like Mario Kart as when they lost a much more violent game such as Fortnite. It was likely the frustration of losing rather than the violence that caused people to act aggressively.

Looking at Mental Health and Gaming Over Time

Two studies in the January special issue add to the evidence showing that violent video games may not be as dangerous as they have been made out to be. These studies are unique because they looked at large samples of youth over long periods of time. This line of research helps us to consider whether extensive play in a real-world environment (i.e., living rooms, not labs) is associated with mental health functioning later on in the teen and young adult years.

The first study revisited the long-standing debate over whether violent video game play is associated with aggression and mental health symptoms in young adulthood. The study reported on 322 American teens, ages 10 to 13 at the outset, who were interviewed every year for 10 years. The study looked at patterns of violent video game play, and found three such patterns over time: high initial violence (those who played violent games when they were young and then reduced their play over time); moderates (those whose exposure to violent games was moderate but consistent throughout adolescence); and low-increasers (those who started with low exposure to violent games, and then increased slightly over time). Most kids were low-increasers, and kids who started out with high depression scores were more likely to be

in the high initial violence group. Only the kids in the moderates group were more likely to show aggressive behavior than the other two groups.

The researchers concluded that it was sustained violent game play over many years that was predictive of aggressive behavior, not the intensity of the violence alone or the degree of exposure for shorter periods. Importantly, none of the three exposure groups predicted either depression or anxiety, nor did any predict differences in prosocial behavior such as helping others.

The second study was even larger, following 3,000 adolescents from Singapore, and looking at whether playing violent video games was associated with mental health problems two years later. Results showed that neither violent video game play, nor video game time overall, predicted anxiety, depression, somatic symptoms, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder after two years. Consistent with many previous studies, mental health symptoms at the beginning of the study were predictive of symptoms two years later. In short, no connection was found between video games and the mental health functioning of youth.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

Taken together, these studies suggest that predispositions to mental health problems like depression and anxiety are more important to pay attention to than video game exposure, violent or not. There is also an implication that any potential effects of violent video games on aggressive behavior would tend to show up when use is prolonged—though the research did not show that gaming itself necessarily causes the aggressive behavior.

So, Should Parents Be Concerned?

These findings are helpful during a year when many kids have no doubt had unprecedented exposure to video games, some of them violent. The most current evidence is telling us that these games are not likely to make our kids more anxious, depressed, aggressive, or violent.

Do parents still need to watch our children's screen time? Yes, as too much video game play takes kids away from other valuable activities for their social, emotional, and creative development, such as using their imagination and making things that have not been given to them by programmers (stories, art, structures, fantasy play). Do parents need to be freaking out that our kids trying to find the "imposter" in a game will make them more likely to hit their friends when they are back together in person? Probably not.

We still need to pay attention to mental health symptoms; teens appear to be feeling the effects of the pandemic more than adults, and levels of depression and anxiety have reached unprecedented heights.

So let's say the quiet part out loud: if they're using video games to cope right now, it's not the end of the world, and if they're struggling psychologically, we should not be blaming the games. Normal elements of daily life have been reduced for teenagers during what should be their most expansive years, for what has become an increasingly large percentage of their lives. It is untenable, and even still, teens are showing us what they always do—that they are adaptive and resilient, and natural harm reduction experts.

As parents, let's stay plugged in to what they're going through, and think more about how games can be supportive of well-being. It's needed now more than ever.

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



3 Ways to Deal with a Partner Who Keeps Crossing Your Boundaries

By Seth J. Gillihan, PhD, **Psychology Today** (Used with the author's permission)

Does your partner keep crossing your boundaries? Boundary violations can include behaviors such as:

- Sharing personal information that you told them in confidence.
- Interrupting your work time without good reason.
- Having their friends over and being loud while you're trying to sleep.
- Yelling to you from another room and expecting you to shout back.
- Making jokes that you find insulting or offensive.
- Touching you in ways you don't appreciate.

Clear boundaries are an essential part of healthy relationships. They define not only what you don't want, but also what you're OK with, just as the lines on a tennis court show what is out of bounds and what's fair play. A boundary says, "I'm OK with this; I'm not OK with that."

So what can you do when your partner doesn't honor the limits you set?

- 1. Clearly express your boundary.** Your partner may not realize they're overstepping the limits of what you find acceptable. Let them know calmly and directly what your boundary is and how their behavior crossed it. Aim to be as specific as possible—for example, "I'm upset that you told your mom what I shared with you," rather than, "You can never keep a secret!"
- 2. Enforce the boundary.** Remind your partner as soon as possible when they've crossed a boundary. Use assertive language that shows self-respect while also respecting your partner. Own your emotions, letting your significant other know how you feel in response to what they did. For example, "I felt embarrassed when you made fun of my hair in front of our friends." Keep in mind that you don't have to apologize for setting this boundary. It's an important part of looking out for yourself and being a whole human being.
- 3. Practice logical consequences.** Boundaries aren't suggestions. They're clear limits, with consequences for when they're violated. Consequences work best when they follow in an obvious way from the undesired behavior.

For example, Mary's partner continues to text her at work despite her requests that he not do so. As a consequence, Mary does not respond to the messages, which would only reward the boundary-crossing behavior. Similarly, Jeff is more cautious about what he tells Barry after Barry broke Jeff's confidence to a mutual friend.

Can People Really Change?

It's generally good advice to not expect your partner to change for the better, especially when it comes to major improvements in personality and behavior. But that doesn't mean positive change is impossible. Each of us responds to the pattern of rewards and punishments we experience and to the information available to us.

If your partner is reasonably agreeable and tends to act in good faith, they will want to respect your boundaries and avoid making you unhappy. While they may not be thrilled when you ask them to change what they're doing, in the long run, it can help them to be the loving partner they want to be for you.

Habitual Boundary Violators

Keeping the boundaries clear in your relationship is an exercise in self-respect, which can foster respect from your partner, too. But what if your significant other keeps blowing past your boundaries like they're not even there? Despite your pleas, they keep ignoring any limits you impose.

If that's the case, you may need to ask yourself if this is a relationship you want to continue. Someone who ignores your boundaries is likely to keep doing so. Consider whether you'll be able to tolerate this pattern of behavior in the long term. The ultimate expression of boundary setting in a relationship is deciding when it's time to end it.



6 Ways to Recover From Pandemic-Induced Financial Anxiety

By Joyce Marter, LCPC, **Psychology Today** (Used with the author's permission)

The pandemic has caused a global mental health and financial crisis. Even before the pandemic, 23 percent of adults and 36 percent of millennials experienced financial stress at levels that qualify for a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Not having enough money keeps our physiology amped up nearly all the time. Without the chance to recover, long-term stress releases hormones that can wear down the mind and body, causing psychiatric problems, diabetes, heart disease, and other health concerns.

A foreclosure, stock market crash, lawsuit or divorce, an unexpected tax bill, business loss, or unemployment all can be traumatic financial losses. The term financial PTSD, not an official psychiatric diagnosis, is often used to describe PTSD-like symptoms triggered by financially disruptive experiences. This includes an array of emotional, cognitive, and physical difficulties in attempting to cope with either abrupt financial loss or the chronic stress of having inadequate financial resources.

Physical symptoms include nervousness, jitters, insomnia, or a startle response to bank alerts or phone calls that could be from debt collectors. Emotionally, we might not be able to feel close to others as we experience apathy, anxiety, depression, hopelessness, or despair. Meanwhile, persistent negative thoughts about finances may make it difficult to concentrate. These symptoms disrupt home and/or work life and cause significant distress.

I've had my share of financial struggles. During the economic crisis of 2008, I had crippling financial anxiety that included panic attacks and insomnia. I had maxed out all my personal credit to keep my counseling group practice, Urban Balance, afloat. I laid awake at night worrying how I would pay my rent and staff. I was sure I would end up filing for bankruptcy.

To save myself, I applied mental health strategies I learned through my own therapeutic practice to improve my emotional wellbeing and financial health. And it worked. In 2017, I sold my practice for several million dollars—something I never dreamed possible until I expanded my thinking.

In my practice, I've helped countless clients recover from financial trauma and improve their mental and financial health using the following strategies:

- 1. Honor your financial traumas that have shaped your relationship with money.** Practice self-compassion as you recognize how the past has impacted how you handle money. Using a multicultural lens, consider how your financial experiences may have been impacted by systemic racism, discrimination, or marginalization. Think about how your family's beliefs about money and financial experiences have shaped your own.
- 2. Remember that you are not only the protagonist of your money story.** You can also be the author. By taking responsibility, you can flip the scene and rewrite the script. Empower yourself to create positive change in your life by shifting your locus of control from external to internal.
- 3. Apply mindfulness to finance.** Use mindfulness practices such as deep breathing, meditation, and yoga to help you:
 - Separate from the harmful aspects of ego. You are not your financial problems. Know that self-worth is internal, not external (title, possessions, bank account). You are innately worthy.
 - Cultivate presence to stop second-guessing the past or worrying about the future. You can be responsive rather than reactive in financial actions and planning when you are grounded in the here and now.
 - Practice healthy detachment (mindful separation from negative emotion) to weather the storms, zoom out for greater perspective, and forge ahead with resilience.
 - Adopt a growth mindset; reframe setbacks or failures as a learning opportunity.



CONTINUED ON PAGE 9.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8.

4. **Be assertive and set healthy financial boundaries.** Negotiate and advocate for yourself, personally, professionally, and financially. Renowned author Suze Orman noticed this same correlation through her work as a financial advisor and said, “Lasting net worth comes only when you have a healthy and strong sense of self-worth.” Cultivate healthy self-esteem and operate in the world in a way that welcomes prosperity.
5. **Cultivate expansive, creative, and open-minded thinking so you see past roadblocks to financial success and focus on opportunities, possibilities, and solutions.** Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) can help you become more aware of and change your negative thought patterns—or in simpler terms, stop your stinkin’ thinkin’. Identify and change negative thinking patterns to make your thoughts more neutral or positive by using thought records or diaries. Emancipate yourself from self-limitation and negative, fear-based, and catastrophic thinking. Identify and restructure irrational and negative beliefs about money.
6. **Break through the barriers of shame, fear, and pride.** Talk to others if you are struggling as financial anxiety breeds in isolation. You are not alone. These challenging times have impacted almost everyone. Help is available. Talking about your problems with friends, family, and/or professional therapists can lead to better problem-solving and more assistance, resources, and opportunities. Reach out to a financial advisor, personal banker, or Consumer Credit Counseling Service to get help with budgeting, debt consolidation, and investment opportunities.

Free yourself from the shame, angst, and stigma that come with financial struggle as you use these strategies. Get ready to feel inspired, empowered, and equipped to improve your mental and financial health and resilience.

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



EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

TRAUMA-INFORMED LIVING

Join us for a deep dive into what it means to live trauma-informed. We will explore the impact of trauma on a personal level and how it shows up in the workplace. We will provide you with skills to navigate this in the workplace by learning more about how to have difficult conversations, how to regulate, and how to set appropriate boundaries.

Learning Objectives:

- » Discussion about types of trauma and how it shows up for different individuals
- » What trauma looks like in the workplace
- » Learn skills to help have difficult conversations, regulate, and set appropriate boundaries

Note: Because this course is interactive, we request that you join from a computer or smart device. This course incorporates break-out sessions and we encourage your full participation in the virtual space.

Wednesday June 21, 2023: 2-3:30 pm or

Wednesday August 23, 2023: 9-10:30 am



Registration required.

Questions? Call the EAP Office at (608) 266-6561.



City employees and their family members also have access to our external EAP provider, FEI Workforce Resilience (an All One Health company). **FEI's member portal** provides access to many articles, webinars, and resources in English, Spanish and French. You can browse as a guest or you can create an account in order to request services online. Click the link above for more information.



*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**

Tresa Martinez, tmartinez@cityofmadison.com

Arlyn Gonzalez, agonzalez@cityofmadison.com
Provides bilingual EAP services in English and Spanish

Mary Eldridge, meldridge@cityofmadison.com
Provides bilingual EAP services in English and Spanish

Sherri Amos, samos@cityofmadison.com

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**).