



A Healthy Outlook!

301-460-2100 • FAX 301-460-2113 • www.mcps.k12.md.us/departments/EAP • Vol. 2, No. 4

Stepfamilies and the Workforce

Frequently overlooked, marital and family distress, particularly as related to stepfamilies, is an area that has a great impact on the workforce.

Consider the following:

- 75% of divorced persons eventually remarry.
- 40% of all marriages are remarriages for at least one of the adults.
- One in three Americans is now a stepparent, stepchild, stepsibling or some other member of a stepfamily.
- 65% of remarriages involve children from a prior marriage.
- Stepfamilies are now the majority family type (data from EAP Digest, Jan/Feb 1999).

For more information or resources pertaining to stepfamilies, contact <http://www.stepfamily.org/> or <http://www.stepfamily.net/index.shtml>

Keeping Your Body Well

Keeping your body well is a lifetime commitment. With only one body and one life, it is the most important job you have. Doing it well also will help you take care of the other responsibilities in your life. To keep your body well, pay attention to—

- what you put into it (food?);
- what you don't put into it (getting enough nutrients?);
- how you exercise;
- how you relax;
- how you manage your thoughts and feelings (what you think and feel causes chemical changes in the body, which impacts your health).

If you have concerns about your health, be sure to speak to your primary care physician. If you feel that stress is impacting your health, consider contacting the EAP for a consultation on how to get on a healthier path.

Therapy for Depression

Along with medication, don't rule out psychotherapy for depression. Psychotherapy can boost the results from medication and help prevent relapse. Also it can help you identify negative or distorted thinking patterns that contribute to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness that accompany depression. Interpersonal and situational causes of depression also may be identified if they exist, and new goals to enhance emotional well-being also can be developed. The EAP can help you find a therapist that's right for you. To find out more about depression, be sure to check out both the Depression and Self-Assessment pages on our updated Web site <http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/departments/eap>

Source: *Frontline Employee*, July 2002.

Web Site Updated

When you get a chance, be sure to check out our updated Web site. It is filled with new links and self-assessments that we hope you will find useful. Included is new information on both depression and anxiety (<http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/departments/eap>).

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Stress-Reduction on the Job

For many of us, our job is a source of income and identity and the place where we spend almost half our life. Think about it. Most of us spend at least eight hours a day at work.

When we include commuting and any overtime, it can amount to 10 hours a day. In today's workplace, stress has surfaced as a primary job issue. Learning to recognize and cope with job-related stress is necessary to lead a productive and rewarding life. Below are suggestions for reducing stress on the job.

■ **Take charge of your situation:** To the extent that this is possible, set and re-set priorities. Take care of important and difficult tasks first. Organize your time. You can be more effective.

■ **Be realistic about what you can change:** Don't set yourself up for frustration and failure. Set realistic and attainable goals. Do what's possible. Accept the rest. Now you're ready to carry on.

■ **Take one task at a time:** Divide each project into smaller, manageable tasks. Make a list of everything that needs to be done and estimate the time for each task.

■ **Be honest with colleagues:** This includes your supervisor. Make it plain that you feel in a bind. Chances

are others are feeling the same. Don't just complain. Be constructive and make practical suggestions for improvement.

■ **Slow down:** Learn to say "No." Drop activities that are not crucial.

■ **Take care of your physical health.** Good physical health increases your stress tolerance. Eat and sleep sensibly. Get plenty of exercise. Cut down or eliminate alcohol, tobacco, and drugs, which alter body rhythms and sleep.

■ **Learn to relax:** Find a safety valve, whether it is a sport, hobby, reading, or just walking. Use it to create a "bridge" between home and work.

■ **Let the MCPS EAP help:** The EAP can help you develop an individualized plan to cope with the effects of stress. All you need to do is call for an appointment: 301-460-2100.

The goal is to develop resilience in response to the workplace stress that we all face from time to time. Resilience means bouncing along with what life throws your way, being flexible and creative in your daily coping.

Adapted from a National Mental Health Association brochure.

Why Do Many Turn to Chemicals for Relief?

Drug and alcohol use has been shown to increase in times of intense stress or grief, because they do provide temporary relief from the acute symptoms associated with heightened fear, loss, and anxiety.

Here's how. Stress, loss, and fear really are the result of how our brain interprets the environment. Whether it's the loss of a loved one or trauma following a terrorist attack, our brain releases a megadose of a chemical called cortisol into our bloodstream. Cortisol sets off a chemical chain reaction that prepares us to run from, or to physically resist, a potential threat. This cascade of brain chemicals serves to keep us alert and ready for action. When threat is no longer imminent, our brain responds by shutting off the cortisol, thereby downshifting into a lower stage of emotional and physical readiness.

This reaction has helped humans escape predators and countless environmental dangers for thousands of years. When stress or sorrow is protracted, that is continual, the brain remains in its hyperstressed state. This imbalance can result in numerous symptoms, including insomnia, mood swings, depression, crying, anxiety, inability to concentrate, and decreased sexual drive.

"Life's most persistent and urgent question is what are you doing for others."

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

Under Medical Supervision

There are times when the temporary use of medication to treat acute stress and emotional trauma is appropriate, particularly when insomnia is present. This approach should be used only under the supervision of an experienced mental health professional in concert with counseling.

If you are having difficulty coping with grief or stress, or are concerned that you may be abusing drugs or alcohol, contact your employee assistance program (EAP).

Source: Drew Edwards. (c) 2001 by Achieve Solutions.

Sedative-Hypnotic Drugs—the Wrong Solution

The times have changed. Most modern North Americans have little time or patience for distress or sorrow. When we hurt, we want relief now, not later. So some run to the medicine cabinet or to the liquor store to find the fastest way to ease the pain.

Sedative-hypnotic drugs—which include alcohol; benzodiazepines such as Valium(r), Ativan(r), Librium(r) and Halcion(r); and marijuana—fool the brain by temporarily interfering with the stress reaction or grieving process.

Rebound Effect

The bad news is that drugs and alcohol never really eliminate the undesirable emotions—they simply disguise them. Unfortunately, when the effects of these drugs wear off, the fear, stress, or sorrow often are experienced more intensely. This is called the rebound effect, because, like a trampoline, our brain chemically overcompensates for fluctuations and changes.

So when a person takes a sedative-hypnotic drug to cope with painful emotions, he experiences an artificial, drug-induced calm. Scientists fear that by artificially inducing calm with drugs, people can inhibit their natural stress-reducing hormones from functioning properly.

So here's the catch: The more someone uses sedative-hypnotic drugs to cope with acute emotional pain, the less ability her brain has to cope with stress and pain in the future. This leads to an increased tolerance to the effect of the drug and, in some cases, dependency. In fact, research has shown that a subset of people who abuse substances became addicted following a period of emotional trauma or heightened stress.

Music Aids in Stress Reduction

Listening to and Playing Music Alters How our Brains and Bodies Function

- Music is hard-wired into the brain and affects brain size. Left brain processes basic elements such as intervals and rhythms. The right brain recognizes holistic traits such as meter and melodic contour.
- Music is used to enhance learning/memory, improve motor control, and reduce anxiety. Numerous studies have reported significant decreases in heart rate, skin temperatures, and muscle activity when music has been used for relaxation.
- The practice of using music as a healing channel can be tracked back to antiquity. The healing power of music is documented in the Bible (1 Samuel 16:23) and Martin Luther once said, "Music is...the only art that can calm the agitations of the soul."
- A study of patients with Alzheimer's disease found that music raised their serum melatonin levels (influences how well we sleep) by more than 200 percent.
- According to a study in Psychosomatic Medicine, listening to music before and during surgery helped patients cope with stress-related rises in blood pressure.
- Children with ADD who listened to Mozart showed reduced theta brain-wave activity (slow brain waves that often are excessive in ADD). They displayed better focus/mood control, diminished impulsivity, and improved social skills.
- Stroke and Parkinson's patients have recovered more rapidly when music is played during physical therapy.
- An experiment with cancer patients who played the drums 30 minutes a day resulted in strengthened immune systems and increased levels of cancer-fighting cells.
- Music has been used with individuals suffering from mental health disabilities, substance abuse, brain injury, physical disabilities, and acute/chronic pain.
- A study showed that listening to music reduced the stress hormone, cortisol. Before surgery, cortisol was reduced by 39 percent; after surgery, it was reduced by 60 percent.

Sources: Harvard Health Publication; Scientific American Mind; Change your brain/change your life, by Dr. Daniel Amen; USA Today; Healthworld Online — Integrative Medicine; and Washington and Shady Grove Adventist Hospitals. The monthly stress management articles are for educational purposes only. For additional information, consult your physician. Please feel free to copy and distribute this health resource.



Upcoming Events

June 14-20

NATIONAL MEN'S HEALTH WEEK — MEN'S HEALTH NETWORK
P.O. Box 75972, Washington, D.C. 20013
Phone: 202-543-MHN-1 (6461), Fax: 202-543-2727
E-mail: info@menshealthweek.org
Web site: www.menshealthweek.org

June 6-12

NATIONAL HEADACHE AWARENESS WEEK
National Headache Foundation, 820 North Orleans,
Suite 217, Chicago, IL 60610
Phone: 888-NHF-5552
E-mail: info@headaches.org
Web site: www.headaches.org

Drugs and Alcohol: No Way to Cope With Grief, Trauma, or Fear

Living with uncertainty, grief, or fear regarding our personal safety can lead to an array of emotional and psychiatric problems, including depression and

anxiety. Unfortunately, too many people are numbing their distress or sorrow by using drugs (prescription and street) and alcohol.

Assessing for Alcohol Problems: The CAGE Screening Method

The CAGE is one of the most widely used instruments for alcohol abuse screening. It consists of four self-report items. Three of the items deal with emotional reaction to drinking. The other focuses on morning drinking to relieve symptoms of withdrawal. If two or more answers are "Yes," originators of the instrument found this to be a strong indicator of alcohol abuse.

Here are the items:

1. Have you ever felt you should cut down on your drinking?
2. Have people annoyed you by criticizing your drinking?
3. Have you ever felt bad or guilty about your drinking?

4. Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or to get rid of a hangover (eye opener)?

If you have concerns about your own or someone else's use of alcohol, please contact us at 301-460-2100 for a more thorough assessment of the problem.

Ask the EAP

Q. I'm wondering about the quality of the help I may receive at the EAP. What are the qualifications of the EAP staff?

A. Most reputable EAPs are staffed by licensed mental health professionals. The MCPS EAP staff are all licensed clinical social workers. In addition, all staff are certified employee assistance professionals. You can be assured that whoever you meet with at the EAP is well qualified to assist you.

Do you have a question for the EAP? Send your questions via FirstClass, Outlook, or the pony to Jeff Becker.



A Healthy Outlook!

To help employees with troubling issues before they become overwhelming.



EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE
SPECIALISTS: Debbie Tipton
Robyn Rosenbauer
Jeff Becker

EAP at North Lake Center
15101 Bauer Drive
Rockville, Maryland 20853
phone: 301-460-2100
www.mcps.k12.md.us/departments/EAP

Important Notice: Information in *A Healthy Outlook!* is for general information purposes only and is not intended to replace the counsel or advice of a qualified health professional. For further questions or help with specific problems or personal concerns contact your employee assistance professional. You may contact us or send your questions and comments to Debra_Tipton@fc.mcps.k12.md.us.

Please note that e-mail is not necessarily confidential.