Feeling worried or even fearful is normal, and sometimes a beneficial part of life. However, intense and persistent anxiety about everyday situations is a sign of something more serious. Anxiety affects over 40 million Americans, interfering with their daily activities. Symptoms of anxiety include a sense of danger or panic, increased heart rate, rapid breathing, fatigue, feeling nervously powerless, and difficulty concentrating. If you've identified with these, help is available. In addition to talking with your doctor or a counselor, you can lower your anxiety level through small but significant lifestyle changes. For example:

- Be healthy – Physical activity and exercise can improve your mood and reduce stress. Also, consider limiting or eliminating substances like alcohol, nicotine, and caffeine, which can increase anxiety.
- Relax – Practice relaxation techniques like meditation, mindfulness, or yoga to minimize stress. Just a few minutes of deep breathing can help improve your mood and your day. Use your senses to observe the sights, smells, and sounds around you rather than focusing on negative thoughts.
- Stay social – Fostering relationships is a key component to dealing with life's worries. It’s crucial not to isolate yourself during times of anxiety. Instead, educate your close family and friends about your plan to reduce anxiety, and see if you can practice healthy strategies together.
- Track progress – Try keeping a journal or using a mobile app to record which coping methods seem to work best for you. This can be particularly helpful if you are meeting with a doctor or mental health professional.

Remember, anxiety does not define you nor does it comprise the whole of your life. It may add challenges, but you’re not alone. Explore the options available for self-help, peer support groups, and individual counseling.
Even though stepfamilies are becoming more commonplace in today’s world, blended families often face some transitional growing pains along the way. If your household is growing in number, remember that nurturing a successful stepfamily takes time, compromise, and motivation.

**TRANSITION PROCESS**

Emotions can run high during the formation of a stepfamily. Guilt over a divorce, anger about sacrifices made, worry about the stepfamily transition, and jealousy between stepsiblings are common. Parents may wrestle with worry, particularly over the perceived favoritism between biological kids and stepchildren. In addition, children struggle to “share” their parent with a new spouse. In short, everyone is trying to figure out his or her role in this new family.

**STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL STEPFAMILIES**

A smooth transition is possible for a beginning stepfamily. The following suggestions can help improve unity within the family:

- **Be patient** – Transition takes time. Attempting to rush the process to adapt will only cause more stress. Respect the process and trust that building relationships between stepparents, children, and stepsiblings takes time.

- **Show respect** – Be cautious not to speak poorly about your ex in front of your children. Shaming your former spouse or using your children as messengers is not a good policy. Never ask your child to spy on your ex and his/her new partner or speak negatively about them. This places your child in an unfair and unhealthy situation.

- **Make time** – Carve out time with your children to participate in their favorite activities. Let them speak honestly about their fears and concerns with the new family. Reassure them you will always love them.

- **Don’t assume** – Even grown children out of the house may struggle with knowing their place in a new stepfamily situation. Listen to their concerns and encourage them that playing a positive role in the new family is still important.

- **Give space** – Every child needs some amount of privacy. Rather than feeling shut off from the child, stepparents should respect the space they need to function better.

- **Don’t personalize** – Stepchildren may not warm up to a new stepparent immediately. Try not to take things personally; their reactions may be more about the process itself than you as an individual.

**SOUND FINANCES**

If your desire is to control your money instead of letting it control you, there are small but significant money principles you can start implementing today. Here are a few strategies to help your financial management:

- **Track your spending** – The first step to controlling your cash is to know where it goes. How much do you spend a month on food, rent, utilities, and entertainment? Write down your money outflow in a one-month period.

- **Look for money drains** – Are you losing money in ways you could easily avoid? Consider ways to trim your dining and entertainment budgets. Pack your lunch, borrow movies from the library, and cancel magazine subscriptions you no longer use. If you don’t have the cash to buy it, you shouldn’t be considering it.

- **Save first** – Deposit the money you want to save each month right away. It seems obvious to save for the future, but we often prioritize the immediate over the long-term. Many employers offer matching programs for retirement or health savings. Take advantage of this free money.

- **Avoid credit card debt** – If you’re unable to pay the balance on your credit cards each month, you should stop using them. It’s too easy to let your credit card debt grow faster than you can pay it off. Instead, work on paying off the balance to avoid high interest rate charges. Always pay more than the minimum suggested.

- **Know your long-term financial goals** – Would you like to own a home, a new car, or help your kids through college? Perhaps you’d like to retire by a specific age? There are a variety of tools available online to estimate these costs and help you start saving today.

- **Reward yourself** – A special purchase or vacation can be a useful motivator to making small, daily changes. Consider how you can celebrate in a financially responsible way. If you’re not in a good financial place right now, remember it won’t help feeling guilty over past money mistakes. Instead, focus on the present and how you can make these simple, small changes to your everyday life. Wise money management can change your family’s present and future.
Trish McGinnis Kidd, LMFT recently joined the EAP clinical staff. As a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and Santa Clara County employee for over 20 years, Trish brings expertise working with substance abuse and mental health issues. She understands our uniquely diverse work culture and is committed to helping those who serve Santa Clara County. She will be providing counseling and training on how substance use impacts our lives.

**Our Staff:**

Top row, left to right:
Mark Antonucci, PhD; Helen Dolan, LMFT, EAP Manager;
Trish McGinnis Kidd, LMFT

Bottom row, left to right:
Nicole Etemadieh, LMFT; Judy Davidson, LMFT;
Maria Contreras, Administrative Assistant

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**Addiction affects our lives and the lives of those we love**

Did you know that one in four EAP clients reports that addiction has touched their lives or the lives of someone they care about?

What are the signs and symptoms of addiction? Does treatment really work?

There are new ways we understand substance use problems and treatment. EAP will be offering classes to help raise awareness about assessment and best treatments available for this chronic, complicated condition.

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**NEW! EAP CLASS UPDATE FOR 2015:**

**Enough Already! For Those Who Do Too Much** .......................................................... May 6

**The Three Musketeers – Resiliency, Mindfulness and Happiness** ........................ May 19

**Retirement: Ready or Not?** .......................................................................................... June 30

**Coping with Grief and Loss:**
Moving through loss in your life... Letting Go! ................................................................. August 4 & 11

**The Three Stages of Parent Care:**
What You’ll Need to Know to Help Your Aging Parents and Yourself .......................... TBD

**Addiction: Why Can’t it Just Stop!** ................................................................................ September 15

**Understanding Life Scripts: An Opportunity for Change** ........................................ November 12 & 19

For more details and to register, go to [www.sccgov.org/scclearn](http://www.sccgov.org/scclearn)

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**PEAK PERFORMANCE**

**Assertiveness Skills**

Do you ever feel like people are walking all over you? Standing up for yourself and your beliefs is necessary for healthy relationships in all areas of your life. Being assertive means respecting the convictions of another while clearly expressing yours as well. Though it might require practice, the ability to say “no” frees an assertive person from taking on too many responsibilities, minimizing one’s stress-load.

**NOT ASSERTIVE**

- People often ask you for things, knowing you’ll say yes.
- You grow angry with yourself when you’re unable to express your thoughts.
- People who report to you at work fail to follow your lead.

**GROWING IN ASSERTIVENESS**

Not everyone has an assertive nature. Some people need more practice, but it can be learned. Here are some practical tips.

**Use “I” statements** — Always try and start your sentences with “I” instead of “you.” For example, “I don’t agree with that statement,” is better than “You’re completely wrong.”

**Practice saying no** — If saying no proves difficult, run through a practice conversation in the mirror or with a friend. Don’t feel like you need to give a long explanation. Be direct.

**Manage anger** — Consider if anger is making you an aggressive communicator instead of an assertive one. Anger management training and assistance might be a helpful resource.

When life feels more like a fight, an assertive person learns to choose their battles wisely. Not every argument is worth it. Make a choice today to let some things go and leave the unnecessary baggage in the past.
It’s no secret that life can be hard. When a group of individuals sharing a common problem get together to help each other heal, they form what is called a self-help, or support, group. Members can help strengthen the individual to cope and problem-solve.

There are many self-help groups, ranging from being independent to partnering with a larger organization. Locations range from an individual’s home, hospitals, places of worship, schools, or other non-profit centers. Some self-help groups are facilitated by a professional, offering wisdom and guidance. Others follow a peer-led style, comprised of people who share the same problem or situation.

JOINING A SELF-HELP GROUP

While a support group can be a wonderfully beneficial experience, finding the right one for you is key. These four tips will help you connect with a group to meet your individual needs.

Ask a professional— The Internet is an excellent tool for finding a self-help group; however, your physician, counselor, or therapist might have a suggestion that fits you best. If they’ve referred other patients or clients to a specific group, they can help you make a more informed decision.

Stay positive— Every group is unique. Perhaps, you’ve found some strong personalities or intimidating people. There might be some unfriendly faces, or maybe the information wasn’t pertinent to you. If your first experience didn’t prove helpful, don’t be discouraged. Stay positive and continue looking for the ideal group.

Share at your pace— Participation in a self-help group is voluntary. There’s nothing wrong if you feel hesitant to share your story. You should never feel pressured to open up about information you’re not ready to disclose.

Speak up— There’s no question too small or silly. If you don’t understand something or have a different perspective, speak up. You’ll get the most from your group experience when you participate. If you’re courteous with others, they will generally hear your questions or input with a mutual respect.

Life’s struggles are real. Sharing the journey with another makes it a little easier to handle. Having the right self-help group for you might be a pivotal piece for your healing and strength along the way.