COUNTY FOCUS
Why It’s Healthy to Forgive

The stressors of everyday life in the work place, in relationships and on a macro-global level can lead to anger, depression, isolation and poor coping mechanisms. They impact our immediate lives as well as the greater society.

The field of science known as Psychoneuroimmunology teaches us about the biology behind our internal stress and how prolonged negative emotions impact our immunities. Simply, our mental state affects our physiology. Every experience we have, and may interpret to have, creates an immediate physiological response between all the systems in our bodies, especially our immune system. Long-standing emotions and tensions activate our stress hormones, like cortisol, that overtime degrade our body’s immune system and can lead to physiological disease.

External and internal stressors (e.g., work stress or personal problems), trauma or overexposure to negative information (e.g., politics or societal problems) for extended periods of time, can create a hyper-vigilance that makes our mental or emotional walls become thicker and less flexible. It can cause mistrust of others, excessive blaming or judging of others or it may trigger shame within ourselves.

In contrast, when we connect to feelings of joy, gratitude and forgiveness, the body starts circulating healthy hormones like dopamine and serotonin. With less cortisol, our immune system can function at its optimal state. We are less likely to get sick when we experience positive emotions and connectedness with other people. It is in our body’s best interest to be more grateful, forgiving and appreciative of life.

How do we do this? Ask yourself questions like:

- “What do I have control over today, in my life, here and now?”
- “What negative thoughts and feelings am I holding onto and how may I release them?”

The most precious gift we can offer ourselves and others is an open presence, and the practice of forgiveness is one of the most vital and artistic of human actions.

Your body and mind will thank you.

“Someone asked me, ‘Aren’t you worried about the state of the world?’ I allowed myself to breathe and then I said, ‘What is most important is not to allow your anxiety about what happens in the world to fill your heart. If your heart is filled with anxiety, you will get sick and you will not be able to help.’” – Thich Nhat Hanh
Buddhist Master, age 92

The County of Santa Clara’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is a labor-management sponsored, confidential, professional resource that provides counseling, assessment and referral services to County employees and their families who want help in solving personal and/or work-related problems. When people are suffering from problems, it is easy to lose perspective. Life may seem confusing and difficult for a time, which can negatively affect work performance. If you have any questions or to schedule a counseling appointment, please call EAP at (408) 241-7772.
HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS
Helping Others Cope with Grief

The chances of experiencing loss in our life is 100 percent. Everyone encounters significant loss at some point. Grief is the emotional reaction to that loss. Whether we face the death of a beloved family member, see a marriage or job crumble, or watch our health or finances diminish, some level of grieving will occur. In fact, anything valuable has the capacity for loss and corresponding grief attached.

GRIEF 101

Grief is both universal and unique in its nature. Some losses, like death, are inevitable but can still leave us shocked or blindsided. No two individuals will follow the same grief path or timetable. Some people adjust quickly to their new environment. Others will take several months or years, especially if their daily life is vastly different, or the loss was a shock or trauma.

Grieving is an intensely personal experience, and no one should determine what is grief-worthy for another. There is no “normal” or standard protocol that fits everyone. Many other factors can play into someone’s grieving process, such as: religious beliefs, cultural traditions, age, and emotional patterns.

Watching others grieve is also painful. We might want to help them cope with their grief but feel ill-prepared or overwhelmed for the task. What if we say the wrong thing and make it worse? Maybe we don’t know how to help. While we might experience and process grief differently than others, there are still some tools to help us walk with others on their grief journey. If you’ve personally experienced significant loss, recalling what others did for you can be helpful.

HOW TO HELP

It’s tempting to do nothing when we’re unsure how to help. More so than words, it is far more beneficial to offer your presence and practical help. Actions such as: bringing/cooking meals, laundering clothes, or providing home and car maintenance are significant ways to show you care. Grief can zap a person’s energy levels, and someone handling these tasks for them is incredibly valuable.

Your presence can be the greatest gift to a grieving family member, friend, neighbor, or co-worker. Offer to participate in traditions or customs with them or find new ones together. Encourage them to make wise choices. This will often require you to dial down the advice and do more listening, allowing them to arrive at their own wise conclusions. Saying you care is good; showing it is best.

THINKING WELL
Marijuana

With the upward trend of recreational marijuana use, it’s important to have a working knowledge that extends beyond the political implications. How informed are you? Is marijuana safe? What are the effects? Are there varying degrees of potency? Take a few minutes to familiarize yourself with these marijuana particulars.

MARIJUANA 101

Marijuana consists of various parts of the hemp plant, containing more than 100 cannabinoids. The most well-known one is THC, the mind-altering chemical that gives one a “high” sensation. Another cannabinoid called CBD is used more medicinally and does not bring the same “high” state as THC. CBD may be helpful in reducing pain and inflammation, controlling seizures, and treating mental illness and addictions.

Marijuana, also known as weed, grass, pot, or Mary Jane, can be ingested in a variety of ways.

- **Smoking** - One of the most common methods of ingesting, smoking marijuana creates an instantaneous effect lasting about two hours.
- **Vaping** - Inhaling the active ingredients with a vaporizer is another method. It poses risks of breathing difficulties and passing out.
- **Oral** - Mixing marijuana into foods or liquids is an example of oral ingestion. The effects are slower, stronger, and last longer.
- **Sublingual** - Clinically-approved marijuana medications, or sublingual sprays, are taken under the tongue.
- **Topical** - Lotions, salves, ointments, oils and bath salts mixed with CBD can help with localized pain. This method does not reach the brain and can last up to two days.

MEDICINAL BENEFITS

The scientific data for marijuana as a treatment for many medical conditions is ongoing. Some health issues, such as chronic pain, multiple sclerosis, and glaucoma are being studied. Many other disorders and diseases are also considering the possible medicinal benefits of marijuana in a controlled, supervised scenario. Currently the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has not recognized the medicinal value of marijuana. Just like tobacco products, smoking marijuana poses serious health risks to the lungs and cardiovascular system.

MARIJUANA RISKS AND EFFECTS

When you factor in the potential costs of marijuana use to your long-term health, the risks are high, no pun intended. The legalization of marijuana in several states does not make it safe. Used mostly for recreation, marijuana is said to induce a relaxed state. However, continued use has been linked to anxiety, depression, and schizophrenia in some users. Like alcohol or tobacco, marijuana use during pregnancy or breastfeeding increases risks for the child.

The consequences of marijuana use to your brain affect you in both the short and long-term.

- **Short-term Effects** - altered senses, increased heart rate, impaired movement, mood changes, memory and problem-solving difficulties.
- **Long-term Effects** - depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, breathing problems, paranoia, and hallucinations.
PEAK PERFORMANCE
Minimizing Allergens

No one likes being sick. However, without knowing it, you might be making yourself feel less than optimal. Allergens are environmental irritants that make the body react to what it perceives as a dangerous, foreign invader. Some allergies are annoying and some are serious, but one thing is for sure: you want to do as much as you can to keep allergens from taking you down.

ALLERGIC TO WHAT?

Go to any store or restaurant and you will hear someone mention some sort of allergy. It might be a certain food, animal, medication, or substance that causes some symptoms. Diagnosis by a medical professional is an important place to start, but avoiding the allergen is the best way to handle allergies.

FOOD

The most common food allergens include: eggs, milk, peanuts, tree nuts, fish, shellfish, wheat, and soy. Symptoms can include hives, coughing, wheezing, dizziness or swelling of the tongue. In extreme cases, anaphylaxis – a life-threatening reaction that impairs breathing and causes a drop in blood pressure – may occur. Some people react to pollen on uncooked fruits and vegetables as well; this is oral allergy syndrome.

- Studies are being done on patches and other ways to introduce miniscule amounts of the allergen into a person’s system, to help decrease allergic reactions.
- In the case of oral allergy syndrome, cooking the food solves the problem of any problematic pollen.
- Having an epinephrine auto-injector is crucial for anyone with a food allergy, as it is hard to predict when a serious reaction will occur. Use it immediately if you notice any symptoms, and go to the ER or call an ambulance every time you use it.

ENVIRONMENTAL

Pollen and pet dander can cause sneezing, itchiness, runny nose, or red and watery eyes. People with Asthma may be triggered even more by allergens. Bee stings can cause swelling, itching, hives, coughing, or anaphylaxis. While it is impossible to completely avoid these irritants, there are steps you can take to minimize risk.

- Control dust mites by cleaning your home regularly, including sweeping, vacuuming, and dusting. Wash cloth items (think bedding, rugs, furniture, and curtains) on hot.
- Keep windows and doors closed to keep pollen outside and keep humidity low to prevent growth of mold. While air duct cleaning might help, it is more beneficial to decrease sources of allergens, so keep your HVAC system clean by using certified air filters.
- Keep an epinephrine auto-injector on hand if there is concern that a severe reaction to a bee-sting could occur.

SOUND FINANCES
Ditching Disposables

With holiday bills coming due, who isn’t hoping to save a few extra bucks? When you look outside, chances are there’s no money tree in the backyard. Yet, we may unknowingly be chucking cash by the handfuls right out the window.

Let’s face it. Disposables like paper products, cleaning supplies, and plastic water bottles were designed to make our life easier. To an extent, they do. However, while certain purchases seem more convenient to our lifestyle, they’re less so to our budget. They also put a strain on the environment, as some disposables could take hundreds of years to decompose, and others never will.

LASTING OPTIONS

If you’re looking to save some extra green, and go a little more green in the process, consider disposable alternatives for a win-win. While some longer-lasting products may cost a little more upfront, you’ll save money over time by not purchasing so frequently. Here are some options to keep from you from throwing your hard-earned dough away.

- Food Storage and Prep - Zip up the savings by switching to glass or plastic containers. Single-use products like plastic wrap and baggies are a trash-filler and wallet-emptier. Consider a stretchy silicone lid or beeswax wrap. Act like a professional and use a silicone baking mat instead of parchment paper.
- Cleaning - Reaching for a paper towel is convenient but costly. Switch to a towel or microfiber cloth to mop up those messes. Look for concentrated cleaning solutions to minimize plastic bottle purchases. Check into natural cleaner recipes with baking soda or vinegar. Add some essential oil drops to customize the smell.
- Coffee - Stay calm. You can still have your morning cup of Joe. Coffee pods can cost up to five times as much as ground coffee. If you simply can’t live without your single-use machine, consider a reusable coffee pod. The earth will thank you.
- Hygiene - There are reusable alternatives for cotton balls, makeup sponges, disposable razor blades, and even feminine hygiene products. Do some research to see what you can sub into your routine for extra benefits.

A few simple changes won’t instantly rain down money, but in time you might just see a money tree begin to sprout.
COACH APPROACH
Building Cultural Competency

There are over seven billion people on Earth. We have seven continents, four oceans, and countless cultures. Interacting with someone from a different background, even if it is not visible, is a guarantee. Cultural competency is important in all aspects of life.

WHAT IS CULTURE?
Culture has many definitions. Some common aspects of culture include: a group that shares experiences such as customs, arts, social institutions, behaviors, or attitudes that influence one’s view of the world. This group might be based on gender, ethnicity, nationality, class, religion, or level of ability. Some cultures are fluid — maybe you move to a different part of the country and adapt to that lifestyle or experience a life-changing illness — while others are fixed. Some would argue that we are all part of at least one culture.

STEP ONE
The first step in working toward cultural competency (a journey rather than a destination) is to become educated about your own culture. How would you describe yourself? What does a day in your life look like? Think about your background, where you live, and life experiences you have had. By learning about how your “groups” have influenced you, you can begin to see how your “groups” are not the only ones that exist, and that many interact — and not always in the best ways.

STEP TWO
Examine your stance on other cultures. What have your parents, friends, or the media told you? How much interaction have you had with people from other backgrounds? How do you understand words like “majority” and “minority?” While this can be an emotionally charged journey, it will benefit you and those around you. There are many tools, books, and even online videos that can help you along this journey.

STEP THREE
Don’t be afraid to make mistakes. As you learn more, you will realize there is more you need to learn! Act with curiosity and in a genuine manner, and apologize when necessary. Make sure to take into account that not everyone communicates, dresses, makes decisions, perceives time, or holds the same values (in the same way) as you.

REPEAT
As you realize the differences that exist, you will also begin to realize how you can celebrate and appreciate the similarities that tie humans together. Increasing awareness can increase positive interactions, and that is a win-win.