

# CONNECTIONS

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## Welcome Our New EAP Specialists

### Kyra Johnson

Kyra Johnson is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT) with the Employee Assistance Program at the City of Madison. She focuses on decolonizing therapy, while honoring a person's culture to enhance self-awareness, emotional regulation, and relational effectiveness. In her work she strives to create a safe and collaborative space for people to practice their goals, express themselves, make mistakes, and try again. She has experience working with grief, anxiety, trauma, PTSD, complex trauma, relationship issues, couples work, family work, neurodivergence, personality disorders, somatic movement interventions, and restorative justice training. In her spare time, she enjoys dancing, spending time with her nephew (he is a dog), and creating new memories with family.



*"Life is a winding road without a map or forecast. Support is the quiet passenger who stays beside you through every turn."*

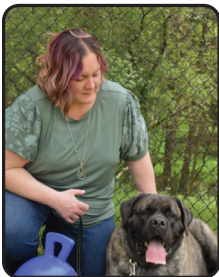
### Amy Albert

Amy Albert is an Employee Assistance Specialist with the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). She is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) and Clinical Substance Abuse Counselor (CSAC) in the State of Wisconsin. Before joining EAP, Amy worked in public sector roles, including with the Department of Corrections and Rock County Human Services Department, as well as in a private outpatient therapy practice. Her counseling experience included work with adults across a variety of backgrounds, including first responders and others in high-stress public service roles.



Amy's background includes outpatient therapy, clinical supervision, leadership support and training in trauma-informed approaches. She values being practical, approachable and collaborative. She enjoys helping employees better understand their stress responses and identify realistic next steps during stressful or challenging times.

Outside of work, Amy enjoys traveling, music, cooking and baking, and spending time with friends, family and training her dogs – including Maxine, pictured here.



Bring on the warm weather!! Summer can be busy and overwhelming at times, please find time to enjoy nature and sunlight. Both can positively affect your mood and mental health. We hope you find some useful information in this edition of our newsletter and as always if there is anything you need or would like to see in our upcoming editions please reach out. We are here for you.

In this edition you will find:

- Introduction of our new staff
- The Role of Food in Mental Health
- The leadership skill no one talks about
- Beyond the ice bath
- How parents can prioritize self-care this summer
- Coping Skills Bingo

Warmly,

The EAP Team



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# The Role of Food in Mental Health and Mental Illness

*The importance of omega-3s and more.*

By Mitchell B Liester, M.D., **Psychology Today**

## Key points

- What we eat shapes our mood, brain health, and mental health.
- Mediterranean-style eating provides remission rates equal to antidepressant medications.
- Gut microbes and psychobiotics influence brain chemistry, including serotonin and GABA.
- Most medical schools do not provide adequate nutrition training, and patients suffer as a result.

Psychiatrists are trained to prescribe medicines, refer patients to psychotherapists, and perform procedures — such as ECT, TMS, or IV ketamine. But this is changing. Some psychiatrists are learning to utilize an equally valuable and effective strategy for relieving suffering and promoting mental health.

The idea that diet and nutrition have significant effects on mood and mental wellbeing would have been dismissed as fringe medicine two decades ago. But research increasingly demonstrates that healthy nutrition improves mental health, and an entirely new subspecialty has formed to support this.

## Nutritional Psychiatry

Nutritional psychiatry — which is the study of how dietary patterns, nutrients, and gut-brain interactions influence our mental health — is expanding rapidly. Research in nutritional psychiatry grew 15-fold from 2000 to 2024, which reflects the growing interest in this topic. Over 31,000 articles were published during this period. This is also evidence of the increasing acceptance of the role diet plays in our mental health.

Epidemiological evidence, particularly for depression, suggests there's an association between the quality of our diet and our mental health. These associations don't appear to be explained by other demographic or lifestyle factors.

## The SMILES trial

Perhaps the most important single study in this field is the 2017 **SMILES trial**. It was the first randomized controlled trial designed to evaluate a dietary intervention for reducing depression in adults with clinical depression.

The SMILES trial was a 12-week, single-blind, randomized controlled trial of a dietary intervention as a treatment for moderate to severe depression, with depressive symptoms used as the primary endpoint. These symptoms were assessed using the Montgomery-Åsberg Depression Rating Scale.

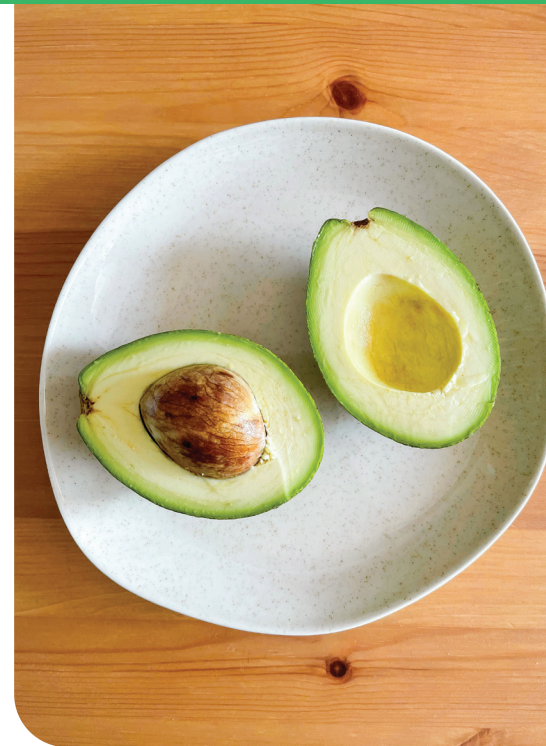
The results were amazing. Remission was achieved for 32.3% of the intervention group and only 8.0% of the control group.

To put this in perspective, the STAR\*D trial, which was the largest and most influential antidepressant trial ever conducted, enrolled over 4,000 patients with major depression and found about one-third of participants reached remission after 12–14 weeks of treatment with the antidepressant citalopram.

That means the SMILES dietary intervention achieved a remission rate equivalent to the antidepressant tested in the STAR\*D trial. And it did this without medication, without side effects, and without the diminishing returns patients experienced as they moved through the STAR\*D trial's subsequent treatment levels.

## The Mediterranean Diet leads the evidence

A Mediterranean-style diet, rich in fruits, vegetables, olive oil, fish, and legumes, has shown the strongest evidence for mental health benefits. Multiple randomized controlled trials have demonstrated that this style of eating reduces the risk of depression and anxiety. Its benefits are likely the result of anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and vascular mechanisms, all of which directly affect how our brain functions.



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The HELFIMED trial replicated and extended these findings. A Mediterranean-style diet supplemented with fish oil produced greater improvement in depression and improved quality-of-life at three months, with improvements persisting for six months. Individuals who adhered to the Mediterranean-style diet experienced reduced depression, particularly when they ate more nuts and more diverse vegetables.

## The gut-brain axis

In order to understand how food affects our mental health, we need to take a look at neurobiology. The food we eat influences numerous systems in our body including inflammation, oxidative stress, the gut microbiome, epigenetic modifications, and neuroplasticity.

The gut microbiome is especially important. Psychobiotics are probiotic organisms that exhibit positive effects in individuals who are treated for mental disorders. These organisms can produce neurotransmitters such as gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) and serotonin, as well as short-chain organic acids (SCOAs) which affect the nervous system. Approximately 90% of the body's serotonin is produced in the gut. So, what happens in our gut has a profound influence on what goes on in our brain.

## Specific nutrients with psychiatric evidence

Beyond specific diets, certain individual nutrients can also influence our mental health. Selective food supplements can be beneficial in the treatment of psychiatric disorders, including S-adenosylmethionine (SAM-e), N-acetylcysteine (NAC), zinc, B vitamins, vitamin D, and omega-3 unsaturated fatty acids.

Omega-3 fatty acids are particularly important. The World Federation of Societies of Biological Psychiatry now recommends omega-3s as an adjunctive treatment for mood disorders, with EPA showing the strongest effect for major depression.

Is your psychiatrist recommending changes in your nutrition? Despite growing evidence of the role nutrition plays in mental health, psychiatrists receive minimal training in nutrition, and most do not provide nutritional counseling as part of their treatment plan. Why? Most mental health providers are unfamiliar with the evidence that shows nutrition's benefits in mental health. Currently, only 29% of U.S. medical schools teach the recommended goal of 25 hours of nutrition in preclinical years. This lack of training has significant consequences for our patients.

Now that research has demonstrated that poor diet is a risk factor for mental health and that individuals with mental illness are more likely to have poor dietary habits, the case has

never been stronger for integrating nutrition into psychiatric training and practice.

## New Therapeutic Options

The accumulating evidence doesn't mean that a bowl of salmon and leafy greens will replace Prozac or cognitive-behavioral therapy. More likely, nutritional counseling will be an option that is discussed and recommended along with existing therapies. When I sit with patients who are struggling with depression or anxiety, we discuss their diet and how it could be impacting their mood. Our patients deserve to know what therapeutic options exist and how they can utilize these options to feel better.

When patients change their dietary habits, they often begin to lose weight and feel less depressed. This results in them feeling empowered to make other changes in their lives. They become less tolerant of abusive relationships or unhealthy work environments. They realize that addictive patterns can be changed. They grow in self-confidence and self-esteem. These are changes that result in lasting growth and healing.

The brain consumes roughly 20% of the body's energy. If we don't provide it with healthy fuel (i.e. healthy food), our patients may not respond to our treatments. The research is clear, and now it's time for doctors and therapists to empower our patients by providing them with the information they need in order to experience true healing; not just a reduction in their symptoms.



# LEADERSHIP *Matters*

## Protecting Your Energy: The Leadership Skill No One Talks About

*You can't lead well if you're constantly running on empty.*

By Megan Dalla-Camina, Ph.D, **Psychology Today**

When we talk about leadership, the focus is almost always on what you do. Communication. Influence. Strategic thinking. Decision-making. Performance.

But the foundation that holds all of those things together, and that determines how well you can actually show up for them, is often overlooked: Your energy.

We see this every day in our coaching programs: brilliant, capable women who know what's required of them but are too depleted to consistently deliver at the level they expect of themselves. It's not a capability issue. It's an energetic capacity issue.

And no one's talking about it.

### Why protecting your energy is a core leadership skill

We don't often hear energy management discussed as a leadership competency. But it should be. Because how you manage your energy impacts how you lead every single day.

If your energy is depleted...:

- You're more reactive and less strategic.
- Your communication becomes less clear and more emotionally charged.
- You're likely to over-function or overwork to compensate.
- You struggle to make decisions with confidence and clarity.
- You burn out while still delivering, at a high personal cost.
- Your energy affects your ability to think, influence, innovate, and connect. It's the difference between showing up with presence or just pushing through the day.

This is why protecting your energy isn't about being indulgent or escaping responsibility. It's a deliberate leadership practice.

### 4 practical ways to protect and manage your energy

Here are four areas we focus on with the women in our leadership programs, and that I have learnt personally through my own burnout and recovery journey. These aren't fluffy self-care tips. They are practical, repeatable habits that will help you lead more sustainably and show up at your best.

#### 1 Learn to say no strategically and without guilt

One of the most effective ways to protect your energy is also the simplest: Say no more often.

This includes:

- Saying no to meetings without clear agendas
- Declining invitations or requests that don't align with your priorities
- Setting realistic limits on how much you take on in a given week
- Saying no doesn't make you difficult. It makes you clear. And in leadership, clarity is powerful.

Start with small shifts. Before you say yes, pause and ask: Is this the best use of my time and energy right now?

If the answer is no, practice a respectful but firm response like: "I'm currently at capacity and need to decline this so I can give focus where it's most needed."

This may feel clunky at first, and that's OK. But the more you practice this, the more you'll notice a shift in how others respect your time, and how you respect it yourself.

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## 2 Build recovery time into your calendar

Many professional women run their days in back-to-back mode—meetings, calls, inbox juggling, and project delivery, on a never-ending loop.

But what most people forget is that your brain and nervous system need space to reset. Without recovery time, your productivity, creativity, and decision-making suffer.

Try this:

- Schedule 10- to 15-minute breaks between meetings, even if it's just to stretch, walk around the office, or sit in silence.
- Block out nonnegotiable focus time during your week (and protect it like you would a client meeting).
- Set a time boundary for when your workday ends, and honour it more often than not.

You do not need to wait for a holiday to restore your energy. Micro-recovery throughout the day builds long-term sustainability.

## 3 Stop over-functioning

Many women fall into the habit of taking on more than their role requires, often without realising it. You become the person who picks up the slack, smooths over people issues, or works late to “just get it done.”

Over-functioning might help in the short term, but over time, it creates resentment, burnout, and unhealthy team dynamics.

Here's how to shift it:

- Get clear on what is your responsibility, and what isn't.
- Ask yourself: Am I doing this because it's truly necessary, or because I don't want to let someone down?
- Practice delegating without guilt. Leadership isn't about doing everything; it's about building capacity in others.

This doesn't mean lowering your standards. It means operating at a sustainable pace that allows you to lead with intention instead of exhaustion.

## 4 Stay connected to what aligns with you

There is nothing more draining than spending your time and energy on work that feels misaligned.

Sometimes that looks like being in the wrong role, with the wrong team, or under a leadership style that doesn't reflect your values. Other times, it's more subtle: too many tasks that don't energise you, or weeks that don't include enough time for the work you actually care about.

Ask yourself regularly:

- What energises me right now in my work?
- What drains me, and is it within my control to shift it?
- Does how I spend my time reflect what matters most to me in this season of my career?

Leadership is not just about performing. It's about aligning, and your energy will always tell you the truth about where you are and what needs to change.

## A Final Reminder

You can have ambition and boundaries. You can lead powerfully without being available 24/7. You can honour your capacity without sacrificing your impact.

You do not need to push through to prove your worth. You are allowed to lead in a way that supports your energy, and you'll be a more effective, respected leader when you do.

Protecting your energy is not the opposite of performance. It's what makes performance sustainable.



## FIRST RESPONDER FOCUS

### Beyond the ice bath: How cold showers can become a paramedic's weapon of wellness

*Cold showers offer a powerful and accessible tool for medics to combat stress, boost resilience and cultivate mental clarity*

By Joshua Lee, MA, MALST, CFE, CAMS, CCCI, CTFI, CCIE, [EMS1.com](http://EMS1.com)

The lives of first responders are a tapestry woven with threads of heroism, resilience and sacrifice. They face the physical and emotional brunt of emergencies, and witness trauma and tragedy that would break most. Like my favorite fiction author Jonathan Maberry writes in his “Joe Ledger” series, “All acts of violence leave scars.” And these scars add up and take a toll on us emotionally, physically and mentally.

Provider wellness is a top priority for EMS providers. Eating clean and exercising are great ways to reduce work-related stressors. We learned about meditation and mindfulness training, as well as the more extreme but highly effective cold plunge.

I love ice baths and have been doing it routinely for many years. But if you don't have access to a cold plunge and cannot make your own ice bath, what other options are available?

The cold shower.

One of my main daily rituals is starting the day with a cold shower. Cold showers are surprisingly simple yet deceptively potent in combating mental health. It only takes one to three minutes and is as easy as turning the knob from hot to cold.

#### The science of the shiver

Let's delve into the science behind cold showers. When cold water hits the skin, it triggers a physiological response known as the cold shock reflex (Hanson, 2010). This reflex starts a cascade of hormonal changes, including a surge in norepinephrine, adrenaline and endorphins (Brennan et al., 2015). These hormones have a multitude of benefits:

**Stress reduction:** Norepinephrine and adrenaline trigger the “fight or flight” response, but in cold exposure, this translates to heightened alertness and focus. This can help manage chronic stress, a constant companion for first responders, leaving them calmer and more prepared to face demanding situations (Yamamoto et al., 2005).

**Pain relief:** Endorphins, the body's natural painkillers, are released in abundance during cold exposure (Brennan et al., 2015). This can provide relief from chronic pain, a common issue for firefighters, police officers and paramedics because of the nature of their work (Cote et al., 2010). For me, the ice bath is far more effective for pain relief than a cold shower, but cold showers can temporarily help the pain.

**Improved circulation:** Cold water constricts blood vessels, forcing blood toward the core organs. Upon rewarming, blood vessels dilate, leading to improved circulation throughout the body (Hanson, 2010). This can boost energy levels, reduce fatigue and even enhance immune function (Brennan et al., 2015).

#### Beyond the physical

The benefits of cold showers extend far beyond the physical. The act of stepping into the cold requires courage and mental fortitude. Your body wants you to get out and stay warm. Staying in cold water is a daily test of willpower, pushing past perceived boundaries and forging inner resilience. This translates into improved self-discipline, focus and mental clarity — invaluable assets in the high-pressure world of first responders.

More research is being conducted on cold water therapy and mental health. Research suggests that cold exposure can have a positive impact on mood and mental health (Liu et al., 2018). The release of endorphins and the activation of the sympathetic nervous system can combat symptoms of depression and anxiety — conditions that disproportionately affect first responders (Soderstrom et al., 2015). For me, cold water therapy was the No. 1 change I made that made the biggest improvement in my overall mental health.

The ritualistic nature of cold showers can also provide a sense of grounding and control in the face of chaos. The daily plunge becomes a personal anchor, a moment of self-care amid the



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storm. It’s a reminder that amid the external chaos, we can control our internal environment, fostering a sense of empowerment and agency.

### Embracing the chill

So, how can first responders incorporate cold showers into their routines? Start slow. Begin with cold water for the final 30 seconds of your shower, gradually increasing the duration as you acclimate. Remember, consistency is key. Aim for every day — or at least a few times a week — to reap the full benefits.

And beyond the physical, embrace the mental challenge. Focus on your breath, stay calm and celebrate your small victories. The cold shower will become your personal Everest, a daily reminder of your inner strength and the power of small, consistent actions.

Note: For those of us in hot weather states, our water may not get cold enough for cold water therapy in the summer. Phoenix, Arizona cold tap water in the summer can surpass 100 degrees. In these cases, you may need to invest in a home cold water system like the one provided by Silient. This system connects directly to your cold water line, providing 39-degree water straight to your shower. For more, visit [silient.com](http://silient.com)

### Conclusion

In a world that demands so much from first responders, it’s time we prioritize their wellbeing. Cold showers, though seemingly simple, offer a powerful and accessible tool for first responders to combat stress, boost resilience and cultivate mental clarity. So, open the cold tap, step into the unknown and discover the transformative power of the chill. It might just be the weapon of wellness you’ve been missing.



## IT TAKES A VILLAGE

### How parents can prioritize self-care this summer

By **Rogers Behavioral Health**

Summer is a much-anticipated season for families—longer days, new adventures, and more time together. But for parents, summer also brings unique challenges, such as disrupted routines, increased demands, and the pressure to juggle it all while keeping your cool. While it’s easy to put your own mental well-being on the back burner, it’s important to prioritize your own needs, too.

Rogers Behavioral Health’s Dr. Amanda Heins, PsyD, supervising psychologist for OCD and Anxiety Center Adolescent Residential Care in Wisconsin, explains why maintaining balance and self-care are key for thriving in the summer months.

#### What challenges do parents face in the summer months?

While children feel a lot of excitement about having the whole summer away from school, parents can quickly feel overwhelmed without adequate planning and support.

**Strain on emotions:** Working parents feel the pull of wanting to be in two places at once. They need to be at the office, but they also want to be home with their children. Parents who are at home for any length of time with the children can feel drained tending to everyone’s needs throughout the day.

**Strain on time:** Parents want their children to be involved in activities. Figuring out how to get everyone where they need to be (while preserving your work hours) is no small task!

**Strain on finances:** Depending on a child’s interests and a family’s financial resources, costs of keeping kids active and involved can add up fast.

School provides predictability. Everyone knows where they need to be and when. During the summer months, if there’s too much flexibility and not enough predictability, that can add up to stress for parents. Unstructured time is good for kids to engage in creative play, problem-solving, and explore outdoor activities. Not every child is comfortable with that freedom, so it can take a little time and nudging from parents.



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## What are ways parents can care for themselves over summer?

I have several suggestions for how parents can care for themselves over the summer.

### 1. Consider creating a summer schedule.

Someone might be thinking, “Wait a minute. Don’t we want to take a break from schedules in the summer?” While summer gives everyone time to relax, it’s important to remember that structure plays a key role in supporting everyone’s mental health. That doesn’t mean scheduling every minute of the day all summer long but, rather creating a sense of predictability through simple home routines.

Think about setting clear expectations for things like:

- They give kids a chance to practice life skills, and kids generally feel good about contributing. Plus, it eases some responsibilities for parents.
- Screen time. There are plenty of studies about how too much screen time impacts kids’ mental health.
- Reading and math practice. A little each day can help prevent what’s known as the “summer slide,” where kids lose some of what they learned over the school year.

### 2. Find prosocial activities based on kids’ interests.

Examples include:

- Clubs (art, chess, biking, robotics, scouts, etc.)
- Recreational classes
- Day camps or overnight camps
- Creative arts/music/theater
- Volunteer opportunities through a religious or community organization

These activities help kids develop social skills while encouraging collaboration, problem solving, empathy, and resilience, all of which contributes to their growth and well-being.

Besides providing parents with some structure, they offer opportunities to partner with other parents or close friends. Whether it’s carpooling or splitting up drop-offs and pick-ups for multiple kids at different activities, a little coordination can make life easier.

### 3. Schedule time for self-care

It’s always important to prioritize self-care, especially while we’re caring for others. As parents, we need to ensure we’re filling up our tanks, too. The best way to protect personal time away from parenting is to plan ahead as much as possible. While creating a summer schedule, build in time for yourself to do things you enjoy, like a date night with your partner or dinner with friends.

Everyone deserves time to recharge, and we’re most likely to get that when we proactively plan. I encourage parents to not wait until they really feel like they need a break, because that’s a good indicator that they’ve waited too long and are overwhelmed and stretched too thin.

### 4. Think about what kind of summer you want to have

One of the biggest takeaways for parents as they’re preparing for summer is to think about what kind of summer they’re hoping everyone will have, including themselves. Kids are only young for so long and they grow up quickly. Besides balancing all the responsibilities as a working parent and ensuring kids’ activities, we need to build in family time as well. Not sure what to do? That’s even better. Bring the family together to brainstorm how to spend dedicated time together. Family time does not have to be costly; this could involve dedicated time where parents or caregivers are actively playing Legos, dolls, etc. with their children, a dance party, art time, baking, gardening, movie night, reading, family walk, game night, and so much more. You just might be surprised at what sticks and could turn into a family tradition.

## What would you say to a parent who thinks they can manage everything by themselves all summer long?

It’s tempting to juggle all the things all the time and think we’re superheroes. But we’re not. While some people have the skills to successfully manage many things at once, my question to them would be: at what cost?

Chances are they’re feeling exhausted and a little edgy, and I get it. No judgment here. We’re all human. Taking on too many things and burning out isn’t something we want for ourselves, and we don’t want to model that to our kids who learn by watching us. Some days, juggling everything is just part of being a parent—I know that firsthand. But more often than not, we can find ways to share the load, whether it’s with our kids, a partner or spouse, family, friends, neighbors, or childcare providers. Look for those opportunities. You’ll feel more balanced, and in turn, you’ll create a healthier, more balanced environment for everyone.

# Coping Skills BINGO



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

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