Welcome

Welcome to the spring issue of ESP News. Now that winter is over, we slowly start to enjoy longer days and more sunshine. In this issue we will look at how you can support your children during the exam period, now that the scholastic year is nearing its end. All of us, to some extent or another, have been through difficult moments in our life and in this issue we would like to share with you some tips on how you can deal with these situations when they happen to someone close to us, either in our family or to our colleagues.

We would like to thank you for your support and positive comments regarding our services we would like to take the opportunity to remind you once again of the services provided through the ESP Unit.

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1. Supporting your children through exam stress

The exam season can be a stressful time for both students and their parents. It’s normal for parents to be anxious about whether their children will get the results they need. However, parents can play a key role in helping their children cope with exam stress.

A child’s anxious feelings are often translated into physical health symptoms such as digestive and bowel problems, eczema flare ups, nausea, feelings of inadequacy, irritability and anger. The child can also become indecisive or confused, have difficulty sleeping and panic attacks and develop habits such as nail biting.

The following are a few tips how to manage and support your children during exam time.

- Create a peaceful environment. Reduce distractions like TV and computer games during study time
- Ensure that the child gets adequate breaks of fresh air between study periods
- Avoid negative talk
- Beware of unrealistic expectations
- Encourage the child to work out past papers and ask the teacher to clarify any difficulties the child may have
- Condense notes onto flash cards to act as short revision notes
• Offer your help. It can be useful having someone to listen or practise with. Study buddies can be helpful
• Encourage your child to practise some relaxation exercises such as deep breathing, listening to music or participate in sports after intensive studying. It helps the child unwind and sleep better
• Be flexible around exam time. Don’t worry about household chores that are left undone or untidy bedrooms. Your time with your child is precious!
• Don’t add to the pressure. Listen to your child, give support and avoid criticism. Be reassuring and positive
• Make sure the child is aware that failing is not the end of the world and that if things do not go well, exams can be repeated
• Finally, when exams are over, do organise an end of exams treat. Celebrate with your child.

Keeping a healthy perspective ensures that both parents and more importantly their children get a safe passage through this challenging time.

2. Facing challenging situations

In life, we all face challenging situations and there are times when we struggle to cope. But how come some people manage to cope, while others feel overwhelmed when faced with certain difficulties? What leads certain people to bounce back after a difficult period and carry on with their life, while others continue to struggle? The way we handle our problems can leave an impact on our psychological well-being. Some people tend to have a greater ability to cope with certain challenges, but the good news is that everyone can learn how to cope better and to become more resilient.

• Research shows that one of the main factors that helps us to cope better with challenging situations is to develop and invest in the relationships with the people around us. Having people who we can trust and with whom we can open up when we are facing a painful situation is of great support in life. However, it is also important to learn to accept the help that we are offered. Moreover, we need to learn to reach out for help when we need it.

• When we perceive challenges in life as an opportunity of growth and one that can help us to learn and develop, this attitude helps us to cope.

• It is also important to acknowledge our skills and what we managed to achieved in life, no matter how small our achievements may seem. Many times we concentrate more
on the things that we cannot accomplish rather than on what we can actually obtain. Maintaining a positive outlook can give us strength and hope in times of difficulties.

- Setting realistic and achievable goals and reflecting on the small steps that we need to take to achieve these goals, can be very helpful.

- Worrying about the future or about issues that we cannot control, does not help us in any way. We also have to keep in mind that we have control only on our reactions and behaviour and not on that of others. Therefore, we cannot change other people's attitudes or character traits. When we focus on the present and on what we can actually do, this helps us face a problem gradually rather than seeing it as enormous hurdle which cannot be dealt with.

- Changes and stress are part of our everyday life. The way we respond to such situations makes a difference on how we cope. The thought of having a life that is constantly the same may sound appealing to some of us. However, when everything remains the same and day after day and month after month, we follow exactly the same routine, life may become monotonous. However, it is important to remember to take care of ourselves and to control our stress levels as much as possible.

- Moreover, in order to have the strength to face our life and its challenges, we need to take care of ourselves and find time to rest.

- We also have to keep in mind that being flexible and adapting to the new situations that we find ourselves in, helps us to cope. This does not mean that we have to accept everything, but it means that we strive to do whatever is within our control.

- Another important point is that we have to be able to accept that we can make mistakes and that whenever this happens, we are not hard on ourselves. In such situations, it is helpful to shoulder our responsibility and to learn from our mistakes.

- Furthermore, when we feel that we are struggling while going through a difficult period, we need to look for professional help. Reaching for help and recognising that we may not always be able to cope on our own is a sign of strength.
By way of conclusion, we would like to refer to a quote by the author A.A. Milne, “There is something you must always remember. You’re braver than you believe, stronger than you seem and smarter than you think” and another one by the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, “I am not what happened to me, I am what I choose to become”. When life presents us with certain challenging situations, it can be hard to move on and to cope. However, by believing in ourselves and in our abilities, by focusing on what is within our control and by reaching out for help if necessary, we would be supporting ourselves in finding a way to cope with these challenges.

3. Supporting a colleague through bereavement:

- Do not be afraid to ask them how they are feeling
- If a colleague takes some time to return to work, do send a text message to show them that you are thinking of them
- Prepare lunch for your colleague and take it with you to share
- Take time to listen to your colleague when wanting to talk about their loss and acknowledge the difficulty they are passing through rather than passing reassuring statements such as ‘I know how you feel’ or ‘they’re in a better place’
- Understand that everyone grieves differently and for different lengths of time
- Ask your colleague if and what support they may need to do their work; do not make assumptions of what support your colleague needs.

4. Employee Support Programme (ESP) Unit FAQs

The ESP Unit offers professional individual support to public employees experiencing personal and/or work-related difficulties that may be affecting their wellbeing. ESP services include initial support sessions, short-term counselling and follow up as necessary. Employees have every right to stop accessing our service at any point they wish without any explanation.

**How can I access the service?**

To make an appointment with the Unit you can either call or send an e-mail requesting an appointment.

Upon contacting the unit, the employee is given an initial appointment where we start offering our support and understand better the difficulties one would be experiencing.

Following the initial support, if there is the need, and in agreement with the employee, an internal referral is made to our psychological service.

**What kind of problems does the ESP help with?**

Although employees may access the service for any type of personal or work-related issue, the following are common reasons why employees contact the Unit:
- Stress, depression, anxiety and other mental health difficulties
- Grief and bereavement
- Family, marriage and other relationship issues
- Domestic violence
- Addictions
- Child-parent problems
- Problems with a superior or co-worker

Is the ESP confidential?

All contact with the ESP is confidential. No one will know of your participation unless you choose to tell them. At no point will information about your contact with the unit be passed on to your place of work. Information shared with the ESP will not be disclosed to anyone without your written permission unless there is risk of physical harm to yourself or someone else. No records are included in your personal file.

All services and interventions offered by the unit are free of charge.

5. News & Events

a. Over the past few months, the Employee Support Programme Unit delivered a number of training sessions to various departments including:

- Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity. An awareness session for the management team was delivered as part of a team building day organised by the Ministry on the 13th January 2017.

- Mater Dei Hospital. Two half day seminars were organised for a number of healthcare professionals in managerial positions on wellbeing at work on 8th and 14th February 2017. Additionally, a two-hour workshop was organised for Consultants in the Anaesthesia Department on debriefing skills on the 15th March 2017.

b. Ms. Marita Galea, ESP Unit Psychologist, attended for a conference entitled “Breaking the Cycle of Attachment Trauma” which was held in London on the 3rd and 4th March 2017.
c. Ms. Stelmart Khalil participated in the EUPAN Working Level Meeting as part of the activities related to the Maltese Presidency of the Council of the EU held on the 3rd & 4th April 2017 at the Excelsior Hotel in Floriana. She facilitated a workshop entitled ‘Increasing employee motivation through support programmes’.