A rough morning at home can lead to employees being more helpful at work

December 8 2022, by Andy Ober

While it's not ideal, experiencing some unpleasantness with your partner in the morning can lead to some productive coping mechanisms during the workday. Credit: University of Arizona

Having a rude encounter with your spouse or partner at home may seem like the first ingredient in the recipe for a bad day at work. But,
According to researchers at the University of Arizona Eller College of Management, employees may be more likely to connect with their colleagues and be more helpful at work after experiencing minor incivility at home.

It's a practice that researchers call "mood repair." Essentially, when someone's day gets off to a bad start at home, they might try to make themselves feel better by being of service to their coworkers later in the day. A study published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* examines the phenomenon.

"Our experiences in our home lives are deeply connected to how we think, feel and behave at work," said lead study author Mahira Ganster, a UA rizona doctoral degree candidate in management and organizations. 
"Anything from making a rude comment while brewing coffee to ignoring one's spouse while getting ready for the day leads employees to have to process and cope with those experiences while at work."

Ganster, along with University Distinguished Scholar and McClelland Professor of Management and Organizations Allison Gabriel and collaborators, tracked 92 couples for 10 working days. One member of each couple was designated as "employee" and the other as "partner," such as a spouse, fiance or long-term romantic partner. The partner documented each morning how they treated the employee before work. Later in the workday, the employees rated areas including how fatigued they felt, the degree to which they were in a negative mood, and how much they helped other people at work.

"What we saw was that employees engaged in 'mood repair'—that [negative mood](#) made individuals more likely to help coworkers with personal problems or their work," Gabriel said. "They were trying to repair the bad mood they were experiencing by trying to connect and interact in the workplace."
Ganster said the positive effects of helping others depended on the type of help the employees provided. Those who helped their coworkers with personal problems felt better in the evening when they came home from work, but those who helped with work-related problems felt worse. The team theorized that's because personal help allows employees to rebuild personal relationships without adding to their workload.

"So, employees looking to cope through helping should look for opportunities to help that foster greater social connections, rather than take on additional work tasks," Ganster said.

**So … is incivility good?**

Ganster and Gabriel are quick to point out that even though incivility in the morning can lead to some positive effects during the workday, that doesn't mean it is an ideal situation.

"We are certainly not saying that it's a good thing to be treated uncivilly by your partner because you're going to go to work and be a good citizen," Gabriel said. "But it does illustrate a possible adaptive coping mechanism that people can use when they start their workday on the wrong foot."

The team said there are lessons to be learned from the research for both employees and managers.

The researchers suggest workers can reduce the effects of an unpleasant morning by engaging in perspective taking, or trying to see things from others' point of view. Ganster said employees who reported higher levels of perspective taking tended to experience less of a negative impact at work.

For employers, Gabriel said empathy is key.
"Organizations and managers need to understand that the experiences that happen at home blend into employees' work lives," she explained. "Leaders need to be supportive of that."


Provided by University of Arizona

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