You wouldn’t wait until your car breaks down on the side of the road to take it in for a tune-up. Neither should you wait until you are feeling broken to seek counseling services.

Denise Hellekson, a clinical associate with the Village Business Institute Employee Assistance Program, encourages people to do frequent “self-check-ins” to see whether they might benefit from a session with a counselor. She notes that counseling is part of the holistic wellness spectrum.

“Healthy people go to the gym to improve their health and wellness, not because they are physically at their lowest point. We get an annual physical to maintain our health, not because we are sick. Counseling is also something we can access to improve our overall sense of health and wellbeing, and is not simply a service to be accessed when we are facing trauma or crisis,” Hellekson says.

“Sometimes we just need a tune-up, some encouragement and assistance to keep on keeping on,” she adds. “If we don’t check in to see where we’re at and get support when things are minor, where is it going to lead if we ignore our needs and let things fester?”

She compares it to exercising or getting a massage – it’s taking 50 minutes for yourself to feel better and lead a more vibrant, healthy life.
Hellekson says one benefit of counseling is being able to hear your own voice without having to censor your thoughts or worry about burdening a friend or family member.

Counselors are neutral, outside sources of support, and sessions are confidential. Counselors can affirm what a person is feeling, provide encouragement, offer coping tools and help to prioritize concerns.

“Sometimes the most helpful thing we can provide is to validate a person’s experience and help them to hear their own voice and realize what they know but have been tuning out or ignoring,” she says.

Self-care starts with self-awareness. Hellekson encourages people to check in with themselves throughout the day and ask, “What am I feeling right now?” Anxious? Content? Irritable? Don’t judge the answer, but find ways to be kind to yourself. Also, people should scan for what they are experiencing physically – a knot in the stomach? Muscle tension? Racing thoughts? If someone is experiencing discomfort, a few minutes focused on breath can help.

These simple check-ins, done regularly, can help people take better care of themselves and realize they might need a tune-up. Signs someone might benefit from a counseling session include:

• Racing thoughts
• Difficulty sleeping
• Feeling like you’re not getting enough breath
• Feeling anxious
• Irritability/snapping at others
• Withdrawing from friends and family
• Lack of concentration
• Difficulty getting up in the morning or facing the day

While people may recognize the need for counseling when bad things happen, sometimes even good things in life – a promotion at work, buying a house, adding a baby to the family – can be overwhelming and stressful.

“Life experiences affect us differently depending on what else is going on,” Hellekson says.

Hellekson says people may hesitate to seek help for many reasons, such as a fear of the unknown or not wanting to feel vulnerable.

Sometimes people may not have had a good experience with counseling previously. In that case, she encourages people to try again. “You wouldn’t stop going to the doctor because you didn’t like the first one you saw,” she says.

For people worried there is a perceived stigma about counseling, Hellekson points to the sheer number of resources in the community to prove that many people are utilizing and finding benefit from counseling services.

An employee assistance program, such as through the Village Business Institute, removes many barriers to seeking help. The counseling sessions are provided at no cost to the employee, and can cover a wide range of concerns, including alcohol and drug use, job stress, family or marriage relationships, financial concerns, or behavioral problems. Employees can call 800-627-8220 to access services.

Hellekson says for EAP employees, there really isn’t anything to lose.

“It’s 50 minutes of uninterrupted time for you,” Hellekson says.

Crisis, From Front

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