

FROM THE EDITOR

Using Employee Assistance Plans (EAPs) to Measurably Improve Mental Health and Performance

Employee Assistance Plans (EAPs) are gaining importance among forward-thinking employers as more than just an extension of their health plan or mental health benefit – returning to their origins as a resource to support human and organizational behavior that impacts health, productivity and emotional well-being. The impact of EAP counseling on workplace performance can be measured and evaluated, and EAPs can help employers tackle the leading reason for lost performance at work, or presenteeism – and that is depression, soon to become the leading cause of disability in the world as well as the second most significant cause of the total global burden of disease.

This issue of JHP has two articles about EAPs. “Evaluating the Workplace Effects of EAP Counseling” (Sharar et. al.) reports on an outcomes study of about 200 employees at two Fortune 100 companies who received EAP counseling through an affiliate provider in 2010. The study used a validated five-item, five-scale outcomes tool, the Workplace Outcomes Suite, specially designed for evaluating EAPs’ ability to reduce the workplace effects of personal problems generally. A pre/post test was used at intake and again days later to measure the impact of counseling on absenteeism, presenteeism, work engagement, life satisfaction and workplace distress. Despite rarely providing “protocol-driven” interventions, EAP affiliate network models produce workplace-related improvements on these scales – with a need for future research using a larger sample size and examining the effects of other types of EAP models. In brief, though, these are important suggestive findings regarding the value of EAPs in general for addressing problems in the workplace.

“Leveraging the Workplace to Combat Depression” (Jones and Paul) examines EAPs in terms of their value as a preventive as well as referral treatment program for this leading cause of lost productivity in the modern knowledge-based work force. The EAP can support employers that want to address depression in the workplace by providing: (1) help designing a workplace-based strategy for depression; (2) services and programs to engage and support employees and their family members suffering from depression.

Support can be given at three levels -- to the organization, to its managers and supervisors, and to employees and their families. Many organizations are reluctant to address workplace depression, partly because they don’t know how to, and partly because they have other prevention priorities for conditions they better understand. But the EAP can help them understand how to communicate and discuss issues relating to emotional health just as they would address healthy eating or preventive check-ups. This starts with enlisting senior leadership to engage male employee populations, typically the most difficult to engage in health issues. But equally important is supervisor training on spotting the signs of incipient depression -- much as with substance abuse – and encouraging help-seeking as well as providing access to company resources – starting with the EAP.

Only half of those suffering from major depression receive treatment – yet research suggests that 80 percent of these people will improve with treatment. This makes early recognition of symptoms and referral to treatment essential, to prevent symptoms from worsening and affecting functionality and productivity at work. The workplace also is an ideal setting for education about mental health issues such as depression, and for providing counseling through the EAP to employees and family members on strong predictors of depression such as financial problems, conflict in relationships, caregiving responsibilities and dealing with long-term chronic medical conditions. Depression affects the whole family, and it’s critical for outreach efforts to extend to the home as well as the workplace.

The projected workplace burden of depression and other mental health issues will only become larger in our modern, high-stress knowledge-based economy. Using the demonstrated ability of EAP counseling to reduce this workplace burden – on safety, disability, health care costs, absenteeism and presenteeism – should be a priority for all employers.



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