

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

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Given what the world experienced over the past two years, mental health issues dramatically increased. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, approximately four in 10 adults in the United States reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder, up from one in 10 adults from January to June 2019. On the plus side, conversations and awareness about the importance of mental health have become mainstream—and more are making mental health a priority.

For workers looking for way to support their mental health, many companies already offer help through their employee assistance program.

FUNDAMENTALS

EAPs came into existence in the early to mid-20th century and began as Occupational Alcohol Programs helping employees get into recovery from alcohol dependence. Today's current services include counseling for employees and their family members,

financial, legal, elder and childcare assistance, and many other resources to help individuals manage their work/life balance. Workplace mental health is still a primary focus for EAPs.

EAP core services typically include the following:

1. Consultation with, training of and assistance to an organization's leadership (managers, supervisors and union officials) for managing troubled employees, enhancing the work environment, and improving employee job performance.
2. Active promotion of the availability of employee assistance services to employees, their family members and the organization.
3. Confidential and timely problem identification and assessment services for

HIGH-IMPACT LIFE EVENTS DON'T JUST INCLUDE NEGATIVE SITUATIONS; THEY CAN ALSO INCLUDE HAPPY OCCASIONS, SUCH AS A WEDDING OR BIRTH OF A CHILD.

employee clients with personal concerns that may affect job performance.

4. Use of constructive confrontation, motivation and short-term intervention with employee clients to address problems that affect job performance.
5. Referral of employee clients for diagnosis, treatment and assistance, as well as case monitoring and follow-up services.
6. Assisting organizations in establishing and maintaining effective relations with treatment and other service providers, and in managing provider contracts.
7. Encouraging availability of and employee access to health benefits covering medical and behavioral problems including, but not limited to, alcoholism, drug abuse, and mental and emotional disorders.
8. Evaluation of the effects of employee assistance services on work organizations and individual job performance.

Counseling and life-management services are only part of how EAPs work with employers. Employers can use EAPs to help recognize changes in employee behavior and develop strategies to retain employees.

EAPs can help employees deal with high-impact life events, which can disrupt employees' daily routine and impact them physically, emotionally, financially and even socially. High-impact life events don't just include negative situations; they can also include happy occasions, such as a wedding or birth of a child. A positive event can be overwhelming and impact one or more areas of wellness.

When employees experience a high-impact life event, the repercussions can ripple throughout the workplace. The distractions can cause the employee to be absent more often and their performance to deteriorate. They may cooperate less with co-workers. Supervisors and HR leaders traditionally have dealt with these issues through performance improvement plans up to and including termination. Employers may want to

consider using EAP services in conjunction with PIPs to set an employee up for success.

A CASE STUDY

Jack is a sales manager and highly valued employee for a manufacturing company. Jack has been employed for 15 years and has been promoted to a leadership position. Several members of Jack's team have approached the plant manager, Bill, with concerns about Jack's explosive temper. Multiple employees have threatened to quit because of his anger. Bill doesn't want to lose his sales manager or employees, and he knows he needs to have a conversation with Jack. As a first step, Bill contacts the company's HR staff, who suggest that he call the company's EAP. An HR representative explains to him that the EAP consultant can walk him through the conversation he needs to have with Jack and discuss the changes Bill expects from Jack at work.

The EAP will also discuss the formal workplace referral process that will put Jack in touch with the EAP consultant. The EAP consultant will work with Jack to assess the change in his behavior as well as his understanding of the workplace expectations. Bill will also discuss with Jack the behavioral expectations and that it is confidential. Jack will sign a release so Jim can be informed about his attendance, participation and progress in the EAP. Bill will not be informed of any personal issues or any diagnoses by the EAP; the information relayed is only to help with the referral and to help Jack with his workplace behavior.

Depending on the EAP, Jack could be seen by an internal counselor/consultant or be referred to someone in the EAP provider

network. That referral source will follow up with Bill after each session and check whether Jack's workplace behavior changes. The counselor will understand that this referral is due to Jack's behavior at work and the expectations of the workplace. The assessment is thorough and will look for evidence of mental health or substance-use problems as well as life-management issues.

Jack meets with his counselor and explains he is dealing with a lot of stress. His father has been ill and in and out of the hospital. Jack has been trying to help his mother more. He also reports he and his wife are having communication issues, which has led to a lot of tension at home. He admits he has been more hot-headed at work. The counselor and Jack set goals for how he will work on these underlying issues. The counselor makes Jack aware of the EAP's elder-care services, which can help him with his questions regarding plans for his father. The counselor also lets Jack know that the EAP can help with legal and financial questions. They discuss how Jack can be more emotionally aware when he is feeling tense to improve communication at work and home. They set a plan for several more sessions to work on understanding feelings and communicating more effectively. The counselor also suggests to Jack that he could benefit from some leadership coaching and recommends he mention this to Bill. Some EAPs offer coaching alongside other training for managers. The counselor also recommends that Jack and his spouse

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seek to do some work to strengthen their marriage.

Jack returns to the workplace with a renewed interest in being his best self. He meets with his sales team and reviews the services of the EAP and encourages others to reach out confidentially. Bill and Jack talk about the improvement in Jack's performance as well as the performance of the sales team. They discuss with HR other ways they can utilize the services of their EAP and talk specifically about a situation several years ago when a beloved employee died in a car accident.

WORKPLACE EVENTS

Most EAPs also offer crisis-management or disruptive-event services to help the workplace and employees when events happen that disrupt workflow, such as an employee death or a workplace robbery. Having someone on site to normalize and discuss emotional reactions makes good business sense for the organization. It shows that the employer cares about its workforce, and it provides stability in what can sometimes be a traumatic situation.

It is important to understand that when an EAP is workplace-focused, it can provide a variety of components to prevent the people problems that can derail a company and create a loss.

EVALUATING EAPS

Employers should consider their specific needs when evaluating EAPs. For example, is the employer looking to provide referral support to employees undergoing specific mental health situations? Alternatively, is the EAP needed to support management in employee relations, counseling and leadership training, and assist in moments of workplace crisis? Questions to consider during the evaluation process:

- Do the EAPs being evaluated focus on the core technology¹ as defined by the Employee Assistance Professionals Asso-

ciation? This means, does the EAP focus on the overall organization and helping workplace leaders understand how the EAP can assist with workplace productivity and performance issues?


- Are services provided for financial, social and physical health issues in addition to mental health? How might the EAP collaborate with an organization's wellness initiatives?
- How does the EAP work with the organization to promote utilization?
- How long does it take for an employee to receive services from the EAP after making an initial contact? Many EAPs promise appointments or services within 48 to 72 hours.
- What type of support is offered to management for handling employee-relations situations? Is the EAP offering consultation and coaching to management to handle employee performance issues?
- If an employer refers an employee to the EAP, what guidance is provided to ensure that the employee's work performance is also addressed? How is the EAP working with the management to operationalize the workplace issues and make those issues the focus of the referral?
- What is the EAP response time if a workplace crisis occurs? Does the EAP discuss the importance of immediate response or waiting a reasonable amount of time before the response, such as 24 to 48 hours?
- What are the credentials of the counselors?
- What is the cost of the program? How does the EAP calculate cost (PEPM, utilization-based or flat rate) as all EAPs do it differently?
- Are policies in place to support the EAP programs, i.e., drug-free workplace and rehabilitation policy?

An EAP can be offered as part of a carrier's group health plan or EAPs exist as a standalone service. Some EAPs solely offer referral services to outside providers while others provide what would be considered health-related services and therefore may be subject to certain laws, including ERISA, COBRA, the ACA and the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act.

Employers should make sure they are not just checking a box that an EAP is in place. Understanding the organizational needs will uncover other questions to properly evaluate individual solutions.

IN CONCLUSION

Many times, EAPs are promoted once a year during open enrollment. This limited exposure likely diminishes the return on such a highly valuable program. The EAP should be a prominent fixture in the workplace, and HR should take advantage of all the promotional materials available.

Employers should also work to erase any existing bias or stigmas that employees may have toward an EAP. Promoting available services, ensuring employee confidentiality and support from leadership are critical to the success of the program.” 

¹ www.eapassn.org/About/About-Employee-Assistance/EAP-Definitions-and-Core-Technology

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