

Workspan Daily

**A Matter of Facts: How Employees Really
Use Their EAPs**

By Kathleen Greer

Decembr19, 2021



***Editor's Note:** Workspan Daily will be publishing a new column from the [Employee Assistance Professionals Association \(EAPA\)](#) for the benefit of our readers to highlight the importance of employee assistance programs and to encourage further discourse on associated topics. New to WorldatWork? Please feel free to join the discussion in our new online community, [Engage](#), or send your thoughts to workspan@worldatwork.org.*

The pandemic has sparked a mental health crisis as employees and their families struggle to balance work and home demands amidst national turbulence. In fact, 47% of Americans report negative mental health effects due to COVID's disruption and isolation. While counseling and

mental health support can help, only 70% of those in need successfully access care. Why? Perceived stigma, provider shortages and systemic access and delivery problems in the United States.

Digital disruptors eager to establish a market presence are highlighting the latter issue as a flaw in conventional employee assistance programs (EAPs). Relative newcomers, such as Lyra Health, Talkspace, Ginger IO, Modern Health and others, are positioning EAP services as inefficient and underutilized. At the same time, they are providing breakthrough approaches to convenience and access. Their activity is catching the attention of venture capital and private equity firms newly interested in mental health care — and the revenue potential of those providing it. As evidence, more than \$2 billion in VC funds has flowed into digital innovators in the past two years.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Experiencing a mental well-being crisis.** The pandemic has sparked a mental health crisis, with 47% of Americans reporting negative mental health effects due to COVID's disruption and isolation.
- **Not enough employees access care.** While counseling and mental health support can help, research shows that only 70% of those in need successfully access care.
- **Top EAPs address mental health.** While some EAP models have failed to adequately heed the growing need for mental health support — due in no small part to the national shortage of practitioners — that is not true of EAPs at the top of their game.
- **Going beyond therapy.** Top-tier EAPs recognize that therapy is only one of the needs people may have relative to their well-being when they reach out for help. Some may be in desperate need of eldercare, childcare, financial assistance, legal help or other work-life aid.
- **Evaluating EAPs.** Employers assessing employee assistance programs and digital solutions must maintain a holistic perspective at both the employee and organizational level, and seek the most efficient, integrated solution for addressing the needs of both.

While some EAP models have failed to adequately heed the growing need for mental health support — due in no small part to the national shortage of practitioners — that is not true of EAPs at the top of their game.

So, what's fact versus fiction in terms of actual EAP use by employees? The National Behavioral Consortium (NBC), a trade association think-tank of top-tier EAPs and managed behavioral health providers, recently put that question to its thought leadership task force. The conclusion? The comparison is “apples to oranges,” because EAPs provide many services beyond just counseling.

Fostering Employee and Organizational Well-Being

Based on the data collected by NBC, whose members serve a total of 30 million lives, top-tier EAPs:

- Offer evidence-based, digitally-enabled mental health solutions as well as personal counseling, immediate impact services, 24/7 access to crisis support, education resources, work-life solutions, leadership training, organizational support, and other critical employee and enterprise services.
- Have decades of experience in providing high-value assistance with complex organizational situations that include workplace violence and other crisis management issues, along with expertise in mandatory referrals, return to work and high-risk behavioral situations.
- Provide easy access to mental health services through a variety of modalities — including face-to-face, online, video, texting, phone and psychoeducation — and have elite, deeply experienced clinical networks that provide immediate assessments, thoughtful matching and expert referrals.
- Complement their counseling services with practical work-life solutions, such as parenting consultations, childcare searches, eldercare consultations, financial guidance, legal referrals, and convenience services.
- Make services available to 100% of the workforce, regardless of organizational level, as well as to household members, including children and adolescents.

This broad EAP approach is based on a belief that everyone needs help from time to time and that work-life issues may sometimes be the root cause of psychological distress. In fact, one NBC member reported that approximately 10% of its work-life calls reveal an underlying mental health need.

In addition, top-tier EAPs reduce HR stress, collaborating with HR to vet new offerings, integrate services with other employee benefits and facilitate access to provider networks. In short, they guide HR through the growing maze of emerging benefit options, evaluating, coordinating and consolidating solutions so the employer doesn't have to go it alone. Equally key, leading EAPs share rich engagement and outcomes data with their HR partners. Comprehensive EAPs typically engage 30% to 50% of employees.

Utilization Claims Versus Actual Usage

In the past, EAPs typically limited their utilization reports to formal counseling sessions. For example, “6% of the workforce used the EAP.” While claims like “6%” refer to scheduled counseling sessions, the number of total employee interactions is considerably higher. Beyond scheduled sessions, EAPs provide “in-the-moment counseling,” 24/7 crisis intervention and follow-up with every caller.

Furthermore, top-tier EAPs recognize that therapy is only one of the needs people may have relative to their well-being when they reach out for help. Some may be in desperate need of eldercare, childcare, financial assistance, legal help or other work-life aid — all significant stressors for employees and their family members. A long-standing value of EAPs is that people can access several services with one call. That is not necessarily the case with digital providers, rendering one-to-one comparisons inappropriate.

Complementing the Digital with the Personal

Equally important, not all mental health values are quantifiable, particularly those that require compassion and emotional sensitivity. In a top-tier EAP model, when an employee or family member reaches out for help, a clinician is standing by to respond with a personal touch. Apps and digital platforms are a convenient modality for many, but do not provide the personal connection that others prefer and, in some cases, deeply need.

Those who are seriously struggling seek more of a concierge approach and a human connection. EAPs know that. After all, would you trust an app to provide help for a teenager in crisis or an adult considering suicide?

Well-Being Beyond Mental Health

When reporting usage to companies, it is important to look beyond formal therapy sessions and understand all the ways EAPs assist employees with their well-being. Top-tier EAPs deliver much more than counseling. Additionally, they integrate services and tailor them to each person’s needs, emphasizing concierge-level support.

For example, an employee grappling with the impact of a divorce may need counseling, financial advice, a legal referral and childcare. A top-tier EAP can extend a helping hand and guide them to all four services in a personalized way.

Moreover, an employee calling with a childcare or financial need may have an associated, unstated emotional need. A licensed clinician has the skills necessary to identify these underlying issues. Technology has not advanced to the point where a bot or online search will recognize intrinsic emotional problems and provide a personalized, vetted referral.

Seeing — and Serving — the Big Picture

Putting it simply — people do not view their lives in sections, with mental health in one compartment, childcare needs in another, work relationships in a third and so on. Employers have a similar view of the workforce: Employees’ home life stresses affect their mental health,

which influences workplace behavior, which impacts co-workers, which creates unease that can infiltrate an organization and weaken, or even destroy, organizational well-being. In the most severe cases, a workplace crisis can erupt, requiring enterprise-wide intervention, leadership training, change management and more.

Therefore, as we continue to confront a national mental health crisis, it is imperative for employers evaluating EAPs and digital solutions to maintain a holistic perspective at both the employee and organizational level, and seek the most efficient, integrated solution for addressing the needs of both.

About the Author

[Kathleen Greer](#) is the founder of KGA Inc. and a member of EAPA and National Behavioral Consortium.

About WorldatWork

WorldatWork is a professional nonprofit association that sets the agenda and standard of excellence in the field of Total Rewards. Our membership, signature certifications, data, content, and conferences are designed to advance our members' leadership, and to help them influence great outcomes for their own organizations.