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The 5th International Employee Assistance Compendium

Edited by

Dr. Dale Masi,

Professor Emeritus, University of Maryland and
President/CEO of Masi Research Consultants, Inc.

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THE UNITED STATES

Jodi J. Frey

I was asked to address trends affecting EAPs in the US in the following three areas: 1) effects of online/virtual counseling on EAP, 2) role of technology and social media in EAP, and 3) efforts toward diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) in the EA field, with trends and future predictions. I conclude with references to organizations and research sources that support some of my observations and provide additional detail and context for anyone searching for a more empirical perspective.

COVID-19 AND BEYOND: IMPACT ON EAP SERVICES IN THE US

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the EA field was constantly adapting to changing needs and demands from US employers and employees. With regular workplace shutdowns during the early stages of the pandemic, causing disruption to many workplaces, EAPs had to quickly pivot to provide 100% remote services. While many EAPs were already offering various counseling modalities, including online options, only a few embraced a completely virtual approach, and many needed to identify new methods and platforms to provide secure and confidential services. This shift to 100% online involved a need to quickly train counselors on best practices for virtual counseling, updating security and digital counseling platforms and working with employers to promote EA services in a new way.

The availability of online and virtual assessments, counseling, and support services has significantly expanded the range of options available to employees. In numerous instances, the adoption

of online and virtual platforms for mental health services has enhanced the accessibility of such resources. Prior to the pandemic, employees who had children or other dependents at home faced challenges in accessing EA services. However, the introduction of virtual modalities has now made it more feasible for them to seek and utilize these services. Furthermore, virtual EA services have been particularly beneficial for employees with mobility and transportation challenges.

Despite not all employees being able to work remotely during COVID-19, the majority of EA services were provided virtually. However, industries like health care, construction, and emergency services lacked the option to work from home, leading to additional challenges in delivering services within a hybrid work environment. This posed difficulties for a workforce regularly exposed to safety risks and potentially traumatic events. In response, EAPs partnered with workplace leaders to provide crisis intervention services for individuals, in addition to training for managers and education for employees on topics such as grief/loss, isolation and loneliness, stress management, mindfulness, and trauma.

Additionally, for industries such as those listed and others where online services were not possible to deliver or would not have been used, EAPs were flexible with hours offered to try and provide services to employees during off-work hours. Some EAPs were able to provide on-site support during the pandemic, when needed, ensuring that they and employees received services in a way that was safe and that minimized as much of the risk of COVID-19 transmission as possible. While some services for emergencies were offered in person, the vast majority of EAPs relied on virtual support programming for individual assessment and counseling and group sessions and training. They also provided additional education about crisis calls and text lines, some managed by the EAP and others provided by the broader community, that could be used to provide support 24 hours per day.

As the US acknowledged the mental health strain experienced by children during the pandemic, working parents and employers increasingly relied on their EAPs to offer enhanced support for parents. The need for employee-parent support services persists to this day, particularly given the concerning rise in suicide deaths among younger adults and adolescents. Suicide overall has been an area that has grown in recognition by workplace leaders. During the pandemic, the US saw a slight overall decrease in suicide deaths. This decrease was not consistent across all demographics and the most recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2023) statistics show that suicide death rates are again increasing. EAPs have been expanding suicide-screening services and reviewing policies and procedures for managing suicide risk, given the increased demand for crisis services.

In addition to concerns about increased suicide risk, the workplace has seen increases in employee substance use relapses and new substance use problems during the pandemic (NIDA,

2022). Historically, EAPs have been a cornerstone of prevention and support services for employees struggling with substance misuse or needing recovery support, and the need for more proactive and supportive services in the workplace to support recovery are critical post-pandemic. Additionally, the need for EAPs to provide training for managers on recognizing and responding to signs of impairment is once again increasing in the workplace.

A focus on helping employees to feel included and valued at work increased during the pandemic as employers' attention to DE&I initiatives also increased. EAPs played a pivotal role in partnering with business leaders to provide support and guidance in their endeavors to foster inclusivity and establish anti-racist workplaces. While trying to support workplace clients, EAPs also had to do their own internal work with their companies, something I wrote about during the pandemic in a *Harvard Business Review* article (Frey, 2020). The lack of diversity in workplace leadership, but also within the EA field, has always been problematic, but with the recent increased focus on DE&I, coupled with new modalities for accessing care and employees demanding more diverse counselors, EAPs are needing to take a continued hard look at workforce development issues and how to encourage people with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds to enter and stay in the field.

Beyond an increased demand for employee choice and diverse counseling specializations, employees are also looking for more holistic mental health services that are also culturally responsive. Recognizing that certain employee groups face unique barriers and challenges to accessing care EAPs continue to be pushed to examine their more traditional services and work to improve the cultural responsiveness of services while breaking down barriers to engagement. Employers have encouraged EAPs to adopt a proactive approach toward well-being, prioritizing early engagement and establishing connections with employees before crises arise and shifting the focus to include more attention to sub-clinical concerns and prevention.

The demand for more preventative and proactive approaches to holistic care connects directly to technological changes observed during COVID-19. As a result of COVID-19, the field focused more on the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) and its influence on the landscape of US EAPs. AI is being used to help EAPs initially screen employees for risk and schedule employees to see a counselor, which is intended to reduce wait times and offer more employee choice. Additionally, EAPs are using technology to develop new online screenings for topics such as suicide, trauma, and anxiety. The screening can be conducted by a chatbot (AI-powered technology) and other types of virtual assistants that ask screening questions about mental health, but are programmed and trained to respond in a more conversational manner, similar to a live person. The responses from employees to the technology assistants can be analyzed using a variety of different types of AI analyses to look for patterns in language, tone, behaviors, and voice that might suggest a possible mental health concern or problem.

Use of such technology can help to provide a foundational assessment from which a live counselor can then pick up and continue with the employee. These AI-supported screenings help to provide an immediate response to employees and cut down on time needed for screening with a live counselor. Employee responses to AI-supported screening can also help the EAP identify what type of counselor would be a good fit for the employee, or any specialized services that a counselor needs to offer. This technology can also be used at follow-up and before additional counseling sessions to track responses and changes over time. These screening interventions are often built into mobile applications that include mental health tracking and real-time support for employee clients.

The use of these online support programs helps to track and monitor employees' mental health and provide data to counselors, allowing them to respond with tailored, real-time personalized feedback and support. Having increased access to data has already helped EAPs evaluate their clinical services even more. Some of the evaluation and research has been published in the *Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health*, many of which are available freely through the EA Archive.

We have also seen a surge in the creation of online support groups and peer support programs. These virtual communities are designed to provide a safe space for employees and other adults to connect with others who share their experiences and who can provide support in times of crisis and recovery. While peer support programs, with their focus on lived experience, are not new, they are having a resurgence in the workplace as employers look for novel ways to provide support in a timely manner and work to reduce stigma while building up psychological safety.

In addition to AI, EAPs became more aware of the potential uses for social media during the pandemic. EAPs have historically minimized their use of social media to promote services, in part, to protect confidentiality. Not using social media in the past has had drawbacks for the field as EA professionals and organizations are not viewed as the leaders or "influencers" on social media platforms and therefore have not been shaping workplace mental health conversations. However, their presence is increasing and will continue to increase beyond COVID-19.

THE FUTURE OF EAPS IN THE US

Although I cannot predict the future with certainty, there are several trends regarding the future of EA in the United States that I can confidently anticipate. Employers will continue to request more mental health services, both through traditional EAPs and newer models of service provision. Given the continued decrease in mental health stigma in the workplace, it is expected that even more employees (and their covered family members) will request access for service. This will increase EAP utilization but also place continued pressures on a broken mental health care

system. The existing state of the mental health care system in the US poses an ongoing challenge for EAPs as they strive to address issues such as lengthy wait times, quality of service, and customized matches to professionals who can provide specialized and culturally responsive care.

As the demand for mental health support continues to rise, there remains a concerning increase in the stigma associated with those seeking help for substance use issues within the workplace. While new and existing cases of substance use disorders during the pandemic increased, services to provide support and recovery did not adequately match this increased demand. Recently in several states, there have been notable changes regarding the legalization of marijuana, and workplaces continue to face challenges stemming from the opioid epidemic, with the emergence of new and complex substances. These ongoing issues place strains on existing support systems, including EAPs. One bright spot is the increased attention and support for Recovery Friendly Workplaces expanding throughout the US (RWF New Hampshire, 2023) and work by the US Department of Labor on Recovery Ready Workplaces (DOL, 2023). These programs continue to grow and include EAPs as an important partner.

EAPs have traditionally played a role in risk management related to mental health and substance use. However, the extent of their involvement in this area has significantly increased, and this trend is expected to continue in the future. Risk management focuses not only on clinical outcomes but also linking clinical care to workplace outcomes such as absenteeism and presenteeism. As employers become more informed about research methods and outcomes, they will continue to put pressure on all workplace programs, including EAPs, to quantify their impact on productivity and safety and to demonstrate effectiveness and return-on-investment.

The explosion of technology within the EA field will continue to push the boundaries of service delivery and meeting employees' preferences, while there will be a continued focus on evaluating ethics and the effectiveness of different modalities and technology options. Most EAPs have adopted some level of technology into their services (i.e., assessment, scheduling, apps, and digital cognitive behavioral therapy or CBT). Some of the newer companies to enter the EA scene during the pandemic have already blended live and technology-based counseling to provide additional support using digital CBT. This integration of live and AI-based services can allow for greater access to real-time EAP client data and feedback to help tailor personalized interventions. The use of technology might also have a positive impact on the broader mental health and substance use fields, which are facing a shortage of counselors. How AI and technology will be harnessed and used in the EA field has yet to be determined. With increased demand for customized and holistic care that can be delivered quickly and effectively, there is pressure on the field to adopt more AI practices into their existing services. Research is only starting on how AI can best be used to support overall behavioral health and well-being.

The continued push toward more upstream approaches to prevent workplace mental health issues and other crises opens opportunities for EAPs to continue to play an important role in organizational culture change. Educating and supporting leaders and managers with coaching and consultation services that include a focus on mental health will be key. EAPs must also fully embrace other aspects of well-being such as health promotion, safety, and risk management. The future for EAP is bright, but how the field will continue to evolve to meet complex challenges in a post-pandemic work world remains to be seen.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jodi J. Frey, PhD, LCSW-C, CEAP

For 25 years, I have had the honor of serving in various capacities within the Employee Assistance (EA) and broader workplace behavioral health fields. My career commenced as a Licensed Certified Clinical Social Worker (LCSW-C), where I transitioned into the realm of EA as a Certified Employee Assistance Professional (CEAP). I obtained a PhD, with my dissertation focusing on EA and workplace crisis intervention. Since 2004, my career has predominantly revolved around academia, culminating in my current position as a tenured Full Professor and the Associate Dean for Research at the University of Maryland School of Social Work (UMSSW). My scholarship focuses on adult behavioral health and well-being, with a specific emphasis on exploring the interplay between work and well-being. I have focused a significant portion of my professional career on suicide prevention, substance use, and mental health research.

I co-founded the International Digital Employee Assistance Archive (EA Archive) in 2013 to provide free access to historical and current EA-focused materials. Within this collection, one can find contributions from esteemed authors such as Dr. Dale Masi, Dr. Marc Attridge, Dr. Patricia Herlihy (EA Archive Co-Founder), and Dr. David Sharar, among hundreds of others. I have also served as Co-Editor-in-Chief for the *Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health* for the past 14 years. For over a decade, I have served as Co-Chair of the National Workplace Suicide Prevention and Postvention Committee. I am also active in the Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA), one of the leading professional organizations for the EA field. The breadth of these diverse experiences serves as a foundation for shaping and informing my perspectives throughout this chapter.

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