

The Need for EAPs: The Workplace Burden of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Problems

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ABSTRACT. *This Research Note reviews themes from research literature on the prevalence and burden of mental health and substance abuse problems among workers to support the general need for why EAPs are needed.*

What are EAPs? EAPs are employer-sponsored programs designed to alleviate and assist in eliminating a variety of workplace problems. EAPs typically provide screening, assessments, brief interventions, referrals to other services and case management with longitudinal follow-up for mental health concerns and substance abuse problems. The source of these employee problems can be either personal or work-related. Those who work for EAPs come from many different professions including social workers, psychologists, counselors, substance abuse specialists, occupational nurses, and others. In Canada, the services are called Employee and Family Assistance Programs (EFAPs).

Why Are EAPs Needed?

Many factors can either support or sabotage the ability of employees to work at their full potential. Personal and family relationship problems, conflicts among co-workers, difficulties with managers, depression and

other psychological conditions, substance abuse, financial issues, legal problems, and child and elder care needs are just some of these factors. The severity of these kinds of personal and workforce issues can negatively impact an employer's bottom line.¹

Fortunately, many in business now recognize the role of these kinds of issues in determining the productivity of their workforce and other indirect human capital costs. For example, a survey of senior human resources (HR) executives found that mental health is now considered the number one driver of indirect business costs, such as lost productivity and absence.² This is important because research has consistently shown that indirect costs are actually typically far greater than the direct costs -- like health care treatment costs and disability insurance claims -- that often get more attention from employers.^{3,4}

Literature Reviews. There now exist over 1,000 research studies in the area of workplace mental health and substance abuse.⁵ Comprehensive reviews of the literature on workplace mental health issues have been done by variety of highly credible sources, including university researchers,^{6,7} the American Psychiatric Association,⁸ the National Business Group on Health,⁹

health benefits consultants,¹⁰ the Canadian government,¹¹ the United States government,^{12,13} the European Union,¹⁴ and the World Health Organization.¹⁵ The conclusions from these reviews all support the need for providing more services to address the mental health and substance abuse problems of employees and their family members.

These reports also note the unique role that the workplace provides for being able to reach the largest group of people in the general population who have mental health issues (the employed). The reviews suggest offering more opportunities for preventing problems and for encouraging the use of services (such as EAPs) through the workplace. There is also a need to reduce the stigma often associated with mental health and substance abuse by creating a workplace culture that is supportive of employee health.

Key Research Findings. Important facts from the literature reviews of workplace mental health and substance abuse problems include the following key findings:^{6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15}

- Mental health disorders and substance abuse problems are widely experienced among working-age populations. An estimated 1 in 4 (25%) adults have a diagnosable mental disorder, 1 in 5 (20%) adults have an alcohol use problem, and 1 in 8 (12%) adults have a drug or other kind of substance abuse problem.
- Many people with mental health disorders and substance abuse problems also suffer from chronic medical conditions and diseases (e.g., comorbidities with heart disease, asthma, diabetes, and hypertension).
- Over a third of people with alcohol and drug substance abuse problems have a high rate of also having another kind of substance abuse problem or a mental health disorder (e.g., dual disorders of depression and drinking, gambling and illicit drugs, etc.).
- Untreated mental health disorders and substance abuse problems can damage the individual in many ways, such as an increased risk of illness, personal problems, incidents at work or school and even family breakdown.
- Employees with untreated mental health issues and substance abuse problems can lead to a host of difficulties for their employers, such as poor customer relations, absenteeism, diminished work quality and performance, on-the-job accidents and disability claims, workgroup morale issues, and turnover.
- Many kinds of psychotherapy and drug treatments have been proven to be both clinically effective and cost-effective, but sadly most people with mental health issues or substance abuse problems never see a professional care provider for treatment.

Conclusion

The high rates of mental health disorders, substance abuse problems, other personal life issues, and workplace stressors among employees and family members supports the general need for EAP services.

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