Ending the Mental Health Stigma
Digital Access, Comprehensive Efforts can Empower Employees

By Anna Mittag, VP Operations at LifeSpeak

Employee assistance professionals know all too well that mental health issues in the workplace are becoming increasingly common. One in six Americans is currently taking medication for mental health reasons. Every day, one million employees skip work due to stress, and depression has become the leading cause of disability worldwide.

It's undeniable: these figures indicate a growing mental health problem, so you would think that education about prevention and treatment of mental illness that affects employees would be widespread.

Unfortunately, this is far from the case. Many Americans are uninformed when it comes to maintaining good mental health and recognizing the signs of mental illness in themselves, their co-workers and their loved ones. Most importantly, employees are uncertain about how best to find support if they or a loved one develops a serious mental health condition.

Employers can turn the Tide on Mental Health

Mental health is especially problematic in the workplace. Employees are often reluctant to disclose a mental health problem to their employer due to fear of being judged by their boss and/or peers. They may worry about being overlooked for job opportunities, or being treated as if they're weak. Employees in this predicament are less likely to receive treatment, and therefore less likely to become healthy again.

However, employers are in a unique position to fix this issue for two key reasons.

❖ First, employees spend a large chunk of their time at work. They're a reliable audience for mental health resources because they consistently show up to the same place every day and spend several hours there, in most cases.

❖ The second reason employers are well-positioned to help is that work pressures are often a root cause of mental illness. A whopping 75 percent of US employees consider their work stressful, and more than half admit to being less productive at work because of stress. Consequently, there's no better place to promote mental health than at work.

Finding out what Employees Need

Let's take the case of a global financial institution our firm

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worked with that had always prioritized the well-being of its employees. They had thoughtfully implemented a wide variety of resources for employees, from retirement planning help and gym memberships to an EAP and more. Their employees took advantage of these services, for sure, but not at the hoped-for rate. So why was utilization low? What were the barriers?

The employer decided they would try something new in order to solve the problem. They took the bold step of shifting from traditional wellness programs to focus on the elephant in the room: employee mental health. With the help of LifeSpeak, an online well-being platform with a special focus on expert-led mental health trainings, the bank engaged its dispersed, 70,000-strong workforce through a concentrated education campaign about mental illness.

Employees received communications containing 5-minute video trainings on topics like talking to a loved one about depression or anxiety, recognizing the signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), determining if a teenager's withdrawal was increasingly worrisome, getting better sleep, navigating difficult conversations, and so on.

Each week, a combination of information about mental illness along with practical tips to promote good mental health were available to each employee. All of these resources were accessible by employees as well as their loved ones to use anonymously — anytime, anywhere.

All told, this initiative created a wave of much-needed conversation. Employees wrote to their employer expressing their gratitude for giving them these tools. They told their own stories about

finally being able to talk to their children about anxiety and depression, or finding the courage to visit a doctor about their own mental health. Many also expressed their joy and relief at seeing mental illness as a medical condition no less valid than diabetes or cancer, and one that has nothing to do with a person's inherent worth.

The Importance of Privacy and Flexibility

There are several key takeaways from this story. Right off the bat, it's imperative that employees understand they can access mental health resources confidentially and anonymously. We still have a long way to go when it comes to reducing stigma, so guaranteeing *protection of privacy* is essential for building trust and maximizing usage.

Employers should also ensure their mental health resources *are available 24/7*. Limiting access — whether it be to work hours, during lunch breaks, or another reason — prevents employees from finding help when they need it most. They shouldn't have to wait to be at work or go home to start receiving support.

Moreover, the resources should be distributed in a variety of formats, such as video, audio, and print. These files should be stored digitally and optimized for use on any computer, tablet, or mobile device. It may sound like a lot of work, but making these provisions accommodates employees who learn differently or have disabilities.

Consider your Sources

Consulting trusted mental health experts is also a must when designing an employee wellness program. Any staff will be far more likely to trust and use your

resources if they know the information is coming from vetted and respected professionals, such as counselors in EAP, psychiatrists, etc. Even better yet, if you can give employees access to these experts in real-time, they will be able to ask their most pressing mental health questions and get immediate answers. Employee clients can then use that instant

feedback to build an action plan and start improving their mental health right away.

Cover all Determinants of Mental Health

Being mentally healthy means different things to different people, and we don't all arrive at mental wellness in the same way. That is why a wellness program should ideally address other issues that can affect mental health, such as physical health, relationships, finances, parenting, and professional development.

It's been consistently proven that all these aspects of an employee's life can influence their mental well-being and job performance. For instance, situations like divorce, debt or even the birth of a child can cause stress, anxiety, and depression. Employers should recognize the impact these variables can have, and provide coping tools employees can easily access and share with their family members.

Walk the Walk

Workplaces need to be safe places where *all* employees feel comfortable and openly support each other. One way you can do this is for managers to start the conversation themselves. Be an example of the behavior you want to see, and their employees will be more likely to follow. Encourage them to use your EAP and share what they've learned. Your program will only work best with maximum buy-in, so don't hesitate to become its first champion.

Summary

While an EA professional does not have to be convinced of the value of a workplace mental health program, it may help to remind

employer clients of the benefits they and their employees stand to gain:

- Healthier and happier employees
- More engaged, creative, productive staff;
- Reduced absenteeism and presenteeism;
- Decreased health care spending;
- Better profitability; and
- Improved goodwill toward *your* organization for being supportive. ■

Anna Mittag (LL.B., BCL) is VP of Operations of LifeSpeak, a digital platform that offers employees around-the-clock access to a wide range of topics related to total wellbeing. Write her at annamittag@lifespeak.com or visit https://lifespeak.com

Key Features of the Workplace Outcome Suite

- Scientifically validated and tested
- Focused on workplace (not clinical) outcomes
- Free with the signing of a license agreement – go to the EAPA website: bit.ly/WOS-License-Agreement
- Short (5 items) and yet still able to detect sensitive change
- Easy to administer – a crucial point since most outcome measures are too time consuming, consider only one aspect, and/or are expensive to purchase or administer.

Check out the tutorial on WOS implementation at www.eapresearch.com or direct your questions or a request for complimentary consultation to dsharar@chestnut.org. **For more on the WOS, see page 8.** ■

Bigger is Better, Right? Part II

By Tim Sumiec

As I explained last month, I am the Manager of Field Operations with Empathia, which is a fancy way of saying that I manage a network of mental health providers across the country and in other parts of the world. It is not a glamorous job, but it is perfect for me because I love people and have thousands of providers in my network.

I find it interesting when companies and brokers compare EAPs on the size of their networks and even more interesting when EAPs claim that they have huge EAP networks. Empathia has fought this issue since I started working for them in 1990. So, let's continue to discuss this age-old question: Is bigger really better?

❖ **Understand your purpose**. Is what an EAP provider does any different than any other private practice provider? You bet it is! A respectable EAP network has providers that are not only solid clinically, but also understand their role as an EAP Affiliate (contracted provider). What is this role? EAPs offer services with clients that range between 3 and 8 sessions. It is not long-term counseling, so issues like addictions and eating disorders are typically referred outside of the EAP services.

A good EAP provider is first-and-foremost great at assessing the client's issues and determining the best course of action. Different from many non-EAP providers, this assessment does not involve giving the client a diagnosis, but seeks a strong understanding about what is going on at the client's workplace and how their issue(s) may be affecting their work performance. When sensitive issues arise about workplace difficulties, the high quality EAP provider remains neutral and doesn't side with the client against the company. The EAP is an employer benefit and is not to be used against the company that is paying for the services.

After the assessment, the EAP provider uses the remaining sessions to either resolve the client issues conclusively or assist the client in a referral for on-going treatment. Referrals can run the gamut from inpatient treatment to support groups found in the community. Though it is nice when the EAP provider is also covered by the client's insurance plan, the client needing services beyond the scope of the EAP (occurring less than 5% of the time) may need to be referred to a different provider or treatment program. Being aware of community resources, including the top-notch local therapists/programs and who is covered by the client's insurance in the area, is an essential role of an EAP provider.

❖ **Responsiveness**. A solid EAP network needs to have availability to get clients in promptly. For a non-urgent case, this means offering a client an appointment within 3 to 5 business days.

I am extremely happy when I have a network filled with well-credentialed providers, who understand the role as an EAP Affiliate, and can offer timely appointments to our clients. But, just now many providers are needed?

A strong EAP network is built around the EAP's client company and employee locations. This typically involves running a GeoAccess Report that compares an EAP's network to a company-provided census of where their employees live. The company/broker may dictate certain minimum standards about the acceptable distance from an employee's zip code that they want an EAP provider to be located, but it is typically 10 miles for an employee in a urban area, 15 miles in a suburban area, and 30 miles in a rural area.

The report tells the company how diverse the EAP's current network coverage is and tells the EAP where there may be holes in the coverage that need to be filled. Finding quality providers in the areas that lack coverage before implementing a new company EAP contract helps to ensure a smoother start when clients begin calling for services.

Though some EAPs calculate utilization differently, typical usage of the EAP is around 3-5%, on average. However, not all of these clients are being referred to the EAP network; some use the EAP's legal, financial, and child/eldercare services, and still others prefer to access information on the EAP website or only to talk to the counselor by phone, video, or text. A company having 100 employees in a given area may mean that less than five clients may access the services.

I also want my EAP network providers to be well utilized. A provider getting a number of referrals will develop a good understanding of our EAP program, better understand the culture and issues of the client companies in their area (something that they can report back to the EAP), and will likely make themselves available when you have an urgent client to be seen or respond to a request for a provider to be on-site immediately for a trauma response at your client company. A provider not getting referrals may forget who you are and could likely leave your network next time you re-credential them.

Does size matter? Definitely – but, the biggest networks are not always the best. ■

Tim joined Empathia (then NEAS) in 1990. As Manager of Field Operations, he oversees Empathia's national affiliate provider network and ensures that the level of service provided exceeds expectations. Additionally, Tim is a former Executive Board Member for the Employee Assistance Professional Association (EAPA) Chapter of Southern Wisconsin. He holds a Bachelor's in Psychology, has a certificate in Criminal Justice, and is a Certified Employee Assistance Professional (CEAP).

*Specific LifeMatters® services vary from company to company, so please speak to your company benefits representative or call LifeMatters to determine the specific services that are available to you.

In the News

EAR Being Added to EA Digital Archive

Twenty years of *Employee Assistance Report* (*EAR*) newsletters are being added to the EA Digital Archive, *EAR* and Archive officials announced recently.

"I am thrilled that Jodi Jacobson Frey and Patricia Herlihy asked us to submit the newsletters for the Archive," said Mike Jacquart, who has edited the monthly newsletter for EA professionals since 2004. "It's quite an honor, and not only that but individuals who access the articles will be able to search for specific articles by author and key words. That is not something we have been able to do, to date."

The intent of the EA Digital Archive, housed by the University of Maryland School of Social Work, is to preserve important historical and current documents in the EA field as well as to provide a national depository for all significant articles, and more recently, multi-media, in the field.

"I have been a long-time reader of *EAR* and always found the articles to be interesting and always seem to have their finger on the pulse of what is going on in the EA field. As Pat and I work to balance the old with the new in the Archive, we just knew we needed to include the *EAR* newsletters" said Jodi Frey.

The Employee Assistance (EA) Digital Archive is a free, publicly accessible site where EA professionals can post original works, historical documents, related papers, and EA-focused multi-media including interviews, presentations and webinars. The EA field is interdisciplinary with experts from a myriad of fields such as social work, addiction, psychology, occupational health and wellness, worklife, peer counseling, human resources, risk management, benefits, and organizational development, among others.

"It is our hope that professionals from these diverse backgrounds will contribute to and use the Archive," Frey stated.

With a total of nearly 3,000 cover stories alone dating back to volume 1 of the *EAR* in 1998, the newsletter will add significantly to the total number of articles, books, white papers, and other documents housed on the EA Digital Archive – which presently has over 1500 articles to review, when you count individual articles in the EAPA publications that were recently added..

The Archive's top read so far in 2017 is the video interview Dr. Dale Masi conducted with Carl Tisone as part of the History of Employee Assistance Programs: A 50 Year Perspective (U.S. and Canada) grant funded by the Employee Assistance Research Foundation.

The Archive can be found at www.eaarchive.org. To learn more about becoming a submitter or how to best use the Archive, email Archive staff at eaarchive@ ssw.umaryland.edu. ■

Fitting a Square Peg in a Round Hole

Celebrating
20
Years of Service!

By RaeAnn Thomas

You've no doubt heard the adage of the futility in trying *"to fit a square peg into a round hole."* Unfortunately, as EA professionals, I think we're guilty of the same practice in providing services that are too often one-size-fits-all, as opposed to individualized.

Assessing the needs of the organizations we serve *should be* the first service we provide, when the fact is that many of the services we provide have become standardized. We look at other providers and territories and try to offer comparable services to be competitive in the market. But these standardized services may *not* be what rural companies need!

As a result, we should conduct a needs assessment to better understand what makes rural companies different from other customers. Such assessments may yield results quite different from the programs we offer to the masses. This involves investing time upfront – *before* we get the contract – so that we can make promises we can deliver.

Unique Needs of Rural Businesses

Clearly, no two organizations are alike. We can, however, gain some understanding by looking at the rural environment in general.

❖ **Ownership** – Rural companies are often family businesses that have grown to employ individuals outside of the family. Financial decisions, such as purchasing services, may be in the hands of an individual who has direct financial interest in the investment.

The business may be small enough to require the EAP to charge a minimum annual rate for available services. Owners and stakeholders may need additional information and education about the financial benefits of an EAP.

As a result, the EAP may have to pay close attention to utilization in order to be seen as useful and necessary. Small, rural businesses often operate very "lean." This means there is no room for waste. Every dollar must be well spent.

❖ **Size** – Because rural companies need to be efficient, it is a real challenge for them to not overhire and yet still complete necessary tasks. This means that cross training is often necessary. In a small firm, a Human Resources director might double as a safety director and shift supervisor.

This overlap means that we may need to provide more than basic EAP services. Consultation for HR issues, conflict management services, supervisor coaching and training, and safety issues should become part of the service package.

> *"Unfortunately, as EA professionals, I think we're guilty of the same practice in providing services that are too often one-size-fits-all, as opposed to individualized."*

❖ **Lack of resources** – Assessment, brief counseling, and referral are at the heart of EAP services, Because there is a lack of resources in rural areas, the EAP may be the only feasible resource! This means that EA counselors must help employees meet their needs in creative ways when our usual toolbox of referrals and resources is just not available.

Summary

Until we begin to assess the personalized needs of rural organizations, we will continue to offer pre-packaged services that are likely to miss the mark in delivering the customized EAP services that all of our customers deserve. ∎

*RaeAnn Thomas is an employee assistance director and a long-time contributor to EAR. **Editor's note**: This is an abbreviated version of a cover story that appeared in the October 2005 issue of EAR.*

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE REPORT

Upcoming Cover Stories Include...

➢ Grief in the Workplace

➢ Autism in the Workplace

➢ Workplace Outcome Suite

Social Media Addiction
is HARMFUL - Part II

By Tony Rao

The word "addiction" brings to mind alcohol and drugs. Yet, over the past 20 years, a new type of addiction has emerged: addiction to social media. It may not cause physical harms, such as those caused by tobacco and alcohol, but it has the potential to cause long-term damage to our emotions, behavior and relationships.

Self-reflection is Lacking

Most of us rely partly on the ability to reflect on our thinking, feeling and behaving to form our own self-image. The problem with social media is that self-image relies mainly on others and their opinions. A recent study found higher narcissism (an exaggerated self-image of intelligence, academic reputation or attractiveness) in Millennial-age college students, compared with previous generations. This does not bode well for a society where self-reflection is key to making informed and balanced decisions.

The digital age has changed the nature of addictions in Millennials, who have replaced one maladaptive behavior with another. Social media certainly looks as if it has replaced alcohol as a way of social interaction with others. It is perhaps no surprise that, over the past ten years, there has been a 20% rise in the proportion of 16 to 24-year-olds who are teetotalers. Ten years ago it was 17%. It is now 24%. Spending time online now seems more desirable than spending time in a pub with friends.

There is no recognized treatment for social media addiction. Although we are starting to become aware of the problem, there is no classification of social media addiction as a mental disorder in the same way as substance misuse. If we want this to happen, there needs to be a clearer definition of the symptoms and progression over time. We will need to answer some key questions, such as: *Does it run in families? Are there blood tests that can distinguish it from other mental disorders? And will it respond to drugs or psychological therapies?* Unfortunately, we still have more questions than answers. ∎

Tony Rao is a visiting lecturer in Old Age Psychiatry, King's College London. Additional source: "Quartz."

Quick Ideas

Things More Managers Need to Do

1. **Communicate**. This includes communicating expectations, goals, deadlines, and more. If you can't communicate, you aren't going to be an effective manager.

2. **Lead**. This includes having a strong vision for projects, holding regular check-ins, and keeping employees accountable.

3. **Connect**. A great manager facilitates relationship building both inside the team and outside the team with other key players.

4. **Praise**. Managers who notice when things are done well and thank or praise the responsible parties are much more likely to be well liked and trusted.

5. **Train**. Most employees want to move up in the company or in their careers, and effective managers help them do just that.

6. **Trust**. Micromanagement is one problem that quickly erodes employee satisfaction. Employees want to know you respect them enough to give them an important project, and that you *trust* them enough to do it.

Source: Bernard Marr, keynote speaker, best-selling author, and a regular contributor to LinkedIn and "Forbes" magazine.

BackBone Inc. Launches WOS PR Initiative

Boca Raton, FL – BackBone Inc., a marketing communications firm, recently announced the launch of a promotional program for all EAPs using the Workplace Outcome Suite (WOS), developed by Chestnut Global Partners. The WOS is a psychometrically tested, validated tool employed by over 600 organizations worldwide to measure an EAP's role in driving employee behavior change and productivity.

BackBone's program is designed to raise awareness of "evidence-based" EAP, targeting business executives unaware of the vital role EAPs can and do play in the efficient running of their operations.

BackBone will work with WOS EAPs in writing and distributing a press release (and/or case study) based on client outcomes. BackBone will offer WOS EAPs a 20% discount on standard pricing, including a discount for wire service distribution.

"The WOS makes the case that investing in EAP and Health/Wellness Coaching makes business sense – which makes it the perfect 'narrative' device for telling stories that a general business audience will immediately get," said Charles Epstein, BackBone President. "This initiative allows us to work with CGP and small and medium-sized EAPs around the country in bringing a sustained, data-supported message to market – one that, over time, will make the business value of evidence-based EAP self-evident and 'automatic.'" ■

Founded in 1996, BackBone, Inc. is a marketing communications, public relations and business development firm specializing in technology, healthcare, and workforce management. Combining specific industry expertise, media savvy, creative communications and advanced technology tools, we get your message to market fast, efficiently and effectively. For more, visit www.backboneinc.com.

Jacquart Joins BackBone Inc.; to Continue in Current Editing Role

Boca Raton, FL – BackBone Inc., a marketing, public relations, and business development firm specializing in EAP, technology, healthcare, and workforce management, recently announced that Mike Jacquart, editor of the *Employee Assistance Report* and *Journal of Employee Assistance*, will join its content marketing practice for EAPs.

While he will continue as editor of these important industry publications, Jacquart will work with BackBone and their EAP clients in developing and coordinating programs that integrate blog posts, white papers, press releases, and case studies – using traditional and social media channels to send consistent, timely messages that reach and influence targeted audiences (purchasers, potential partners, industry influencers, etc.).

Few mid-to-small sized companies have the resources or communications and media expertise to effectively "get the word out." EAPs are also faced with the challenge of communicating with non-EAP, business-oriented audiences unfamiliar with their precise role in improving workforce performance. BackBone's content marketing practice works with EAPs in distilling messages that will resonate with business audiences.

Programs are customized to needs and budgets: from a search-engine optimized white paper, a 90-day initiative leading up to a major trade show or event, to a sustained program where BackBone develops, coordinates, and disseminates all public-facing marketing and informational content.

"We've long admired the quality of Mike's editorial work, his deep industry knowledge and his ability to bring complex topics into focus, which is why we're so delighted that he's joining our team," said Charles Epstein, BackBone President. ■