

# EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE REPORT

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## Innovative Program is 'Manning up' Mental Health

By Sally Spencer-Thomas, Jarrod Hindman & Joe Conrad

**"Men have feelings, too,"** says fictional Man Therapist Dr. Rich Mahogany. *"No, not just the hippies... all of us."*

Dr. Mahogany is a character created to "man up" mental health and help men of working age think about their emotional problems from a different perspective. The tools offered by Man Therapy® provide employee assistance professionals with an innovative method to reach men who might not otherwise use mental health services.

The team behind this mental health program designed it as an "upstream" approach to stem the tide of the tens of thousands of men dying by suicide each year. The team, a public-private, nonprofit partnership is comprised of Colorado's Office of Suicide Prevention, Cactus

(a full-service marketing firm) and the Carson J Spencer Foundation.

The primary goals of the program include:

- ❖ Creating social change among men and the general population about mental and overall wellness;
- ❖ Empowering men to take action-ownership of their mental health and overall wellness by increasing help-seeking behavior; and
- ❖ Reducing suicidal thoughts and deaths among men (long term).

### Getting Started

The Man Therapy® creators sought to address the lack of comprehensive prevention efforts targeting men. The founders noted that men were four times more likely to die by suicide than women and that suicide was the

second-leading cause of death among men ages 25-34.

The team decided to take an unapologetic, bold stance to reach those men most vulnerable for risk of suicide. They developed "Dr. Rich Mahogany" to help translate the issue into a language that resonated with men.

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## Research and Development

For many men challenges exist in acknowledging mental health problems or suicidal thoughts due to deeply engrained conditioning to be strong and self-sufficient. This denial, coupled with men typically not accessing available services, contributes to their high suicide rate.

While recent evidence indicates that men and women experience similar rates of depression, men *actually* account for only one in 10 diagnosed cases of depression, according to Mental Health America. *Research suggests that male depression goes undiagnosed 50 to 65% of the time.*

Further, many men resist asking for help, communicating inner feelings and forming groups around emotional issues. Men seek help less frequently than women across different ages, nationalities, and ethnic and racial backgrounds. However, Man Therapy® argues that this trend is due, in part on men's socialization and in part on health delivery systems and not entirely on "men behaving badly."

Cultural codes of achievement, aggression, competitiveness, and emotional isolation are consistent with the masculine stereotype – whereas depressive symptoms are not. Moreover, ideals of rugged individualism lead to social fragmentation and fewer coping alternatives.

Given this data, it is no surprise that traditional approaches to reaching men with mental health and suicide prevention messages have been mostly unsuccessful – and new, innovative approaches need to be developed.

## Next Steps

As noted earlier, the Office of Suicide Prevention, Carson J Spencer Foundation and Cactus Marketing Communications forged a partnership and set out to uncover a new approach to preventing suicide among men of

working age. For two years the team conducted eight focus groups and eight in-depth interviews to help answer the questions:

❖ *How can we reach men in distress who do not access mental health services?*

❖ *How can we bring suicidal or highly distressed men "back to life"?*

The focus groups consisted of people who surrounded men in crisis – *EA professionals*, HR professionals, members of various faith communities' pastoral care, spouses, and other mental health professionals.

The in-depth interviews were conducted with men who had experienced a suicide crisis (an attempt or aborted attempt) as an adult and were now at least two years past the incident and considered to be thriving. After analyzing the transcribed interviews and focus groups, the team concluded that the following approaches would increase the chances of success in reaching high-risk men of working age.

❖ **Approach #1: Soften the mental health language out of the initial communication.** Many at-risk men were not seeing their problems through a mental health lens, so communication such as, "if you are depressed, seek help," was missing an important subgroup of men.

❖ **Approach #2: Show role models of hope and recovery.** The men suggested that stories of men with "vicarious credibility" who have gone through tough times and found alternative ways to healing would offer hope that change *is* possible.

❖ **Approach #3: Connect the dots: physical symptoms with**

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**emotional issues.** Men were more willing to acknowledge changes in level of energy, sleep patterns, and appetite but did not always recognize how they were tied to mental health concerns.

❖ **Approach #4: Meet men where they are instead of trying to turn them into something they are not.** Participants emphasized the importance of compelling messaging using

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humor, especially dark humor, to break down social barriers. Rather than expecting men to find information in mental health centers, the messages need to show up in locations that men frequent and through media targeting men. Finally, the research revealed that reaching men needs to include an online strategy that allows for anonymity and self-assessment.

❖ **Approach #5: Target “double jeopardy men.”** Knowing that not all men deal with mental health problems in the same way, the team became focused on reaching a specific *subgroup*: men with the most risk factors who were also the least likely to seek help.

❖ **Approach #6: Offer opportunities to give back and make meaning out of the struggle.** Even men conditioned to never ask for help often do so when they have an opportunity to *return the favor*. In other words, “Joe” helps “Ron” clean the gutters on Ron’s house knowing that next weekend Ron will return the favor and help move Joe’s dishwasher to the dump.

The research also indicated that having children and a desire to leaving a positive legacy for them were often important barriers to engaging in suicidal behavior. Volunteering, spiritual growth, and strengthened relationships were also helpful in finding meaning after despair and creating a sense of belonging. For these reasons, the team looked for ways men could engage in reciprocity in a help-seeking, help-giving cycle.

❖ **Approach #7: Coach the people who know and work with the high-risk men on what to look for and what to do.** Several points of research indicated that intimate partners were both the most likely cause for suicidal distress (e.g., divorce,



## Editor’s Notebook

What is it about guys that since we can “fix” so many things, we think we should be able to resolve difficult psychological problems, too?

The truth, however, as *EAR* readers know all too well, is that men can no more “solve” a mental health condition by ourselves than we could mend a broken bone on our own. Fortunately, Sally Spencer-Thomas recognized the need for a different approach to resolving men’s mental health issues by helping develop the Man Therapy® program.

As this month’s cover story and *Brown Bagger* explain, Man Therapy® provides employee assistance professionals with an innovative method to reach men who might not otherwise use mental health services.

This need strikes a real personal chord with me. My friend Jim, the

best man at my wedding, took his life in 2008, and nearly six years later, some friends and I still don’t have all the answers: “*Is there is something I could have done?*” and “*Why didn’t I see this coming?*” This is no doubt true for many people affected by suicide.

Sally and her colleagues are to be commended for developing an approach that holds “great promise for being the bridge between men struggling with mental health problems, and the interventions that can save their lives.” It might be too late for Jim, but it sure *isn’t* for scores of other men. That’s the good news.

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separation, death) *and* the most likely person to intervene and influence a man to seek help.

In addition, research uncovered that *workplaces needed training*, just like CPR, to help co-workers identify suicidal distress and refer to helpful resources (www.WorkingMinds.org). Because of these discoveries, the mental health program needed not only to target men but also to *reach the people who surrounded men in crisis.*

❖ **Approach #8: Give men at least a chance to assess and “fix themselves.”** As one in-depth-interview participant said, “Show me how to stitch up my own wound like Rambo.” The blueprint for change needed to offer mastery-oriented intervention strategies that demonstrate progress and were

time-limited. Simple, self-help strategies would allow men to take action in smaller, concrete steps.

## Summary

Man Therapy® and the innovative strategies the program employs hold great promise for being the bridge between men struggling with mental health problems, and the interventions that can save their lives. ■

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# Stopping the ‘Brain Drain’ – Part I

By Pam Holloway

**Y**ou know George. He’s the guy you call when you have a problem. George has worked for his current employer for nearly 30 years. There’s very little he doesn’t know.

The good news is that George is a vital asset. The bad news is he’s opted for retirement in 2014. And when George leaves, so will everything he knows.

So why didn’t his boss protect the company from losing all that knowledge? Business moves too fast to take the time to rebuild lost knowledge. More importantly, financial losses resulting from not having George’s knowledge when your corporate client needs it could cripple the organization.

### Is it Too Late?

Ideally, the organization should have considered this issue long before George began planning his retirement. But in the fast-paced business world, it’s not uncommon for companies to wait until the eleventh hour to start thinking about what to do.

*With the growing number of baby Boomers either retiring or drastically cutting back their hours, more and more Georges are leaving their companies.* This means your corporate clients need practical, cost-effective ways to keep George’s knowledge from walking out the door with him. The following are some ideas on stopping a “brain drain” from occurring. Additional suggestions will be presented next month.



❖ **Don’t try to capture everything George knows.** Instead, focus on the key processes and actions that illustrate how George does his job. You want to capture the steps in the process, such as how, what, when and where.

❖ **Remember that knowledge is also lost internally.** People don’t have to leave for you to lose their knowledge. Companies also lose knowledge *inside* the organization as experts are promoted or transferred – again, taking with them everything they know.

❖ **Keep track of who knows what.** One of the smartest things your corporate clients can do is to implement a “find the expert” directory. Not only is this generally a low-cost investment, it’s one that offers a dramatic return on investment. The key in making this work lies in the quality of the information collected. It should *not* focus on basic bio or résumé-type data. Rather, it should focus on knowledge and applied expertise – a directory of “who’s worked where, doing what, and with whom.” ■

NEXT MONTH: Finding other Georges, recognizing which knowledge is most important, and maintaining relationships once a “George” leaves.

*Pam Holloway is a business psychologist and co-founder of the training and consulting firm, “About People,” (www.aboutpeople.com).*

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# Building Corporate Character – Part I

By Stan Craig

It seems as if not a day passes by without a new story about ethical breakdowns. From doping athletes in baseball and cycling being stripped of titles and victories to politicians who behave as if sexual harassment and financial self-dealing are privileges of office, the stories are never ending. Why are ethics in decline for individuals and corporations?

❖ First, a Me-first attitude that places corporate interests and individual pleasure or gratification before all other ethical responsibilities.

❖ A craving for power, status, wealth and recognition that sees people, family, friends and others as tools to be used whenever necessary.

❖ An “everybody is doing it” attitude that implies permission for any behavior.

❖ A lack of accountability, which makes ethical misconduct a personal matter.

❖ A focus on short-term benefits at the expense of quality, value and integrity.

The good news is that EA professionals can help prevent ethical issues in both their own organizations and by assisting their corporate clients in making ethical behavior a priority in their firms. Below are a few ways to create a culture of ethical behavior. Additional suggestions will be offered in part II of this two-part article.

❖ **State the values that matter and why — for the firm, clients and employees.** Stated values have a perceived value in the workplace when posted, referred to and taught. They give meaning to the daily work routine. A common commitment to the client, providing the best products in the marketplace, and unparalleled service carry more value than stockpiling profits.

❖ **Publicize the firm’s commitment to ethical values.** Customers, clients and prospective business are all impacted positively when values are publically

stated. It is especially powerful when the values are demonstrated. Many retailers place the dollar amount of their charitable contributions on display.

❖ **Top-down leadership must commit to ethical values.** Research indicates that employees do not believe top management lives up to the values and ethics they say they believe. Leaders must demand the best from themselves and reward employees who report misconduct and violations of the stated policy.

❖ **Managers at every level must pledge to learn, teach and apply the values stated.** When employees see their own management team living corporate or organizational values and expecting all others to do the same, it is a confirmation that values matter. ■

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## Quick Ideas

# Choose Your Words Wisely

- **Be honest.** Start with, “I feel.”
- **Be aware.** Recognize that you might be misunderstood. Ask questions.
- **Be open.** Be tactful, but don’t hold back information either.
- **Be creative.** Humor helps.

- **Be specific.** The *other person* may not understand.
- **Be sensitive.** Different people may react differently to the same situation.
- **Be expressive** when you listen. Use verbal and non-verbal feedback.

- **Be patient.** Interruptions can be irritating, but don’t let them be. ■

*Source: “Taking Charge of Anger: How to Resolve Conflict, Sustain Relationships, and Express Yourself without Losing Control.”*

## Teens Suffer from Deployments

It is widely known that deployment is stressful for military families, including their children. A new study in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* finds that teens from military families are more likely to feel sad or hopeless, have suicidal thoughts and show symptoms of depression than teens of civilian families.

“We are logically thinking about the adult that is being deployed, but we’re not talking enough about the kids left behind and how they might manage the military experience of their parent,” says study co-author Julie Cederbaum, Ph.D., a researcher at the University of Southern California.

To study the relationship between military connections and adolescent mental health, Cederbaum and colleagues reviewed the mental health data of over 14,000 California teens in the

7th, 9th and 11th grades. More than 13% of the teens surveyed had a parent or sibling in the military. Teens who had experienced just one deployment of a parent or sibling were 40% more likely to feel sad or hopeless, 24% more likely to have suicidal thoughts and 15% more likely to be depressed than teens that did not have military connections.

“You see an even bigger shift with two or more deployments,” Cederbaum says. “These kids were 56% more likely to experience feelings of sadness or hopelessness, 34% to have thought about suicide and 41% more likely to experience depressive symptoms.”

Anita Chandra, Ph.D., a researcher at the RAND Corporation who has extensively studied military families notes that not all mental health findings of teens with military connections are

negative. “We also know that kids in these families have exhibited a lot of rebound and recovery from deployment stress and a lot of resilience.”

Even though the Iraq war ended in 2011 and American troops are withdrawing from Afghanistan, the mental health of children in military families is likely to remain an important issue.

“Their children may now be in a home where there’s potential traumatic brain injury, mental distress, or substance misuse,” Cederbaum states. “That service member or veteran is going through an adjustment and the family has to readjust as well.” ■

*Additional sources: Medical Xpress, and EAP NewsBrief, a service of the Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA). Story ideas for this column should be directed to [mike.jacquart@impacttrainingcenter.net](mailto:mike.jacquart@impacttrainingcenter.net).*

### Clinical Perspective

## Genes Associated with Alcohol Dependence

There is good evidence from studies of families and twins that genetics plays an important role in the development of alcoholism. However, hundreds of genes likely are involved in this complex disorder, with each variant contributing only a very small effect. Therefore, identifying individual risk genes is difficult.

Using a new approach that combines genome-wide association studies (GWAS) with information about which human proteins interact with one another, researchers from the University of Iowa and Yale University Medical School have identified a group of 39 genes that together are strongly associated with alcoholism.



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# Trying to Manage People – Part I

By Tron Jordheim

Everyone brings their own personal baggage with them to work. People make poor choices, act rashly and defend their own comfort zones. People have agendas that often have nothing to do with the work agenda that a manager is promoting.

Sometimes the selfish and petty things people do are no surprise. Infighting, jealousy, jockeying for position and defending turf are pretty normal behaviors.

In contrast, every workplace has people who perform well, take care of themselves, are supportive of others on the team when needed and keep below the radar.

The best managers try hard to motivate and guide their people to meet agreed-upon goals. Procedures, protocols and guidelines are put in place to help keep things fair and organized.

Feedback, motivation and direction are given. But at the end of the day, good managers realize that there is no good way to manage people.

But since managing people is the key to any business success, they have to try anyway – *and as an EA professional you are in a perfect position to help*. The following are some ideas you may wish to try with some of your corporate clients' managers. Additional suggestions will be presented in part II of this two-part article.

❖ **Best practices** – Managers need to create models of best performance and best practices for employees to learn, copy and aspire to. You can help managers create goals, requirements and performance thresholds to use as measurement tools. Managers need to be fair and consistent in enforcing performance requirements and

work rules and be honest with employees in assessments of business conditions, communication of company policies and in feelings about workplace performance.

❖ **Know the employees** – Managers need to get to know each of their employees so they can find the right way to approach, motivate and correct each of them as individuals. Spending time together helps solidify teamwork, clarify any problems and helps managers be sure that they and their workers are being accountable to each other. ■

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Genes... *cont'd from Page 6*

“The discovery of these genes may open a new window into the biological mechanisms underlying this alcoholism disorder,” says Shizhong Han, PhD, UI assistant professor of psychiatry and corresponding author of the study.

Han and his colleagues based their approach for identifying risk genes on the idea that genes may be “guilty by association” of contributing to the disease – that

although many different genes contribute to alcoholism, these genes, or more precisely, their protein products, are not independent of each other.

“The proteins made by these genes could be neighbors, or they could be part of the same functional biological pathway,” Han explains. “We took advantage of their biological relatedness to identify a network of genes that interact and together

contribute to the susceptibility to alcoholism.”

Having identified this network of genes, Han and his colleagues plan to narrow down the group to look for the genes that cause alcoholism. “Eventually, it’s our hope that the findings might help to develop drugs to treat or prevent this disorder.” ■

*Sources: University of Iowa Health Care and Medical News Today.*

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## Romantic Bliss isn't Realistic

Valentine's Day might be a fun way to celebrate love, but the type of romance that Hollywood often depicts is NOT a predictor of marital success, according to Ted Huston, a psychology professor at the University of Texas at Austin. Other findings from Huston's study include:

❖ **Contrary to popular opinion, many newlyweds are far from blissfully in love.** In fact, couples whose marriages begin in romantic bliss are particularly divorce-prone because such intensity is too hard to sustain. For one thing, too much romantic bliss makes it difficult to

navigate marriage issues. Believe it or not, marriages that start out with *less* Hollywood-type romance actually have more promising futures.

❖ **The first two years of marriage are crucial** because this is when the risk of divorce is especially high. Surprisingly, loss of initial levels of love and affection, rather than *conflict*, was the greatest predictor of divorce.

❖ **Resolving conflicts is over-rated.** Tying in with the previous point, it is the loss of love and affection, and *not* the emergence of interpersonal issues, which sends

couples headed toward divorce.

"The dominant approach has been to work with couples to resolve conflict, but it should focus on preserving positive feelings the couple has toward one another. That's a very important take-home lesson," Huston said. ■



### On the Job

## Confronting Poor Performers

By Joanne Sujansky

Many managers fall down on the job when it's time to deal with poor-performing employees. Perhaps they don't want to rock the boat, fearing that poor performers will retaliate and sue. Or maybe they don't know how to confront someone in a professional manner. So they do nothing, everyone suffers, and high performers leave. *I suggest the following ideas for employee assistance professionals to help managers confront poor performers:*

❖ **Managers must be specific.** If an employee has been consistently late, they must specify the number of time. Avoid exaggerated statements such as, "You're totally unreliable." Instead, they should say, "This is the

*third time in one week that you have been 30 minutes late."*

❖ **Managers must give timely feedback.** Managers must make the individual aware of what he/she did *immediately* so the employee will clearly recognize what just happened. Don't wait days or weeks to offer feedback, when the incident may no longer be clearly recalled. Too many managers don't offer constructive criticism on a regular basis – waiting instead to "bombard" the employee at a quarterly or annual appraisal. *Nothing mentioned in a performance review should come as a surprise to an employee.*

❖ **Managers need to check for understanding.** They should avoid asking close-ended questions such as, "Do you understand?" An employee could simply answer, "Yes" and the manager

will not know if the message actually got through. Instead, the manager should ask the employee to summarize his/her understanding of the situation.

❖ **Managers should keep a paper trail of discussions.** In documentation, managers need to state the problem, action taken to correct it, dates, the result, and any comments that will help them remember discussions when completing a performance summary.

### Summary

Once managers have a better system in place for confronting poor performers, they usually find that getting them back on track is preferable to ignoring the problem. Everyone will benefit. ■

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