

# The Benefits of Technology Enhanced Aftercare & Monitoring

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IF NEEDED: “Technology, however, can enable us to rethink the way we view aftercare and alter our approaches to connecting employees and case managers with the resources they need. Through the Internet, case managers can instantly communicate with clients from any location.”

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Time and time again, employee assistance and substance abuse professionals have found it difficult to locate appropriate treatment resources for employees after they’ve come to us for help. There’s no doubt that numerous challenges exist in order to increase the probability of continued recovery and reduce the risk of relapse.

Many current systems of aftercare are cumbersome and difficult for employees to access and sometimes do not provide those employees with the care best suited for their individual circumstances.

However, over the past 10 years there has been a great deal of technological advancement for EAPs and SAPs, which has created a more efficient, and effective means of observation and support. It is *not* our intent in this article to support a technology-based program as a stand-alone aftercare plan. Rather, the goal is simply to introduce a new concept – the integration of technology within aftercare and monitoring – and to demonstrate the potential benefits of this approach. Research on aftercare for substance abuse treatment is lacking, but that is not uncommon in cases of new technologies and methodologies.

Regardless, given the astronomical cost of substance abuse in the workplace, finding a structured, affordable, and easily accessible aftercare program is paramount.

## **Case Management**

Ensuring that employees are continuing to recover and making sure that their cases are properly managed is arguably the most difficult part of the aftercare process. Coordinating follow-up schedules and having a comfortable and easily accessible place to meet are just some of the challenges that employees face during aftercare.

Technology, however, can enable us to rethink the way we view aftercare and alter our approaches to connecting employees and case managers with the resources they need. Through the Internet, case managers can instantly communicate with clients from any location. Check-ins can be made as needed while both case managers and clients do not have to worry about the security of their meeting and scheduling a time and place to meet.

Additionally, communicating online allows case managers to obtain necessary resources for a client prior to, *during*, and *even after* their check-ins to further help the case management process. Whether over the phone, chat, or video conferencing, websites such as [www.telementalhealthcomparisons.com](http://www.telementalhealthcomparisons.com) offer technological comparisons across a number of criteria to meet provider needs.

### **Social Connectivity**

From sharing pictures and videos to posting our thoughts on a range of topics, social media has greatly changed the way people are connected. It's long been the practice of health care providers and EAPs to encourage, and sometimes even require, clients to remain connected through some form of social support. Whether it's attendance at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings or some type of community support, research has illustrated the importance of interpersonal relationships to *all individuals*, not just those in recovery.

### **Education**

Sometimes employees make real progress in treatment only to return to the workplace and either forget or have difficulty implementing the skills they learned. One of the ways around this problem is by providing employees with continued education *after* they've finished treatment and making sure that they follow-up and understand the proficiencies they learned. Online tools can make the process of aftercare education not only accessible, but interactive and comfortable as well. Colleges, tutoring programs and many other educational programs have begun using these methods, and the same can be true for EAPs and SAPs. By using online programs, or integrating educational materials into an online aftercare program, EAPs can provide education from an easily accessible source that employees can utilize within the comfort and convenience of their own schedules.

### **Resources**

One of the hardest parts of managing the case of an employee in aftercare lies in finding, providing and coordinating the right resources for each and every employee. Each employee has his or her own different needs and finding the right resources is often difficult. However, with online search engines that are becoming more and more efficient, helping employees find resources is easier than ever. Finding and contacting resources online can be as simple as a click and an email, allowing employees to help tailor aftercare plans to their own personalities.

### **Monitoring**

EAPs and SAPs also find it difficult to monitor the activities of individuals in aftercare. Many employees who enter a treatment program acknowledge the extent to which addiction has affected their lives. Despite their efforts to achieve sobriety, most employees recognize that treatment, direction, and guidance is needed from medical and clinical professionals. Since monitoring aims to assess impairment from substances either through face-to-face evaluation or by self-reporting, utilizing urinalysis as a form of monitoring and confirmation not only allows employees to hold themselves accountable, but it also provides testing reports to family, employers, courts, etc. as continued evidence of progress. Research also supports the use of testing as a deterrent, in addition to it being commonly used by private and public institutions as a measure of continued recovery. Many insurance plans offer coverage for lab services ranging from 100% to low co-pay enabling those who need the added support to obtain this service.

### **Brain-Wellness**

Employees who have suffered from substance abuse or mental health problems often find that when they return to work, they can't perform the way that they used to. While sometimes this is simply a reintegration issue, in other cases these difficulties are due to cognitive deficits that developed from substance abuse or mental health problems. For a long time, many people felt that improving brain functioning had to be specially tailored or made very clinical, making this process difficult for an employee. However, recently many new

and innovative programs have helped employees with cognition difficulties to keep up on their brain-wellness efforts. These programs, many of which are easily accessible online, can provide another means to foster and encourage growth and improvement in aftercare.

### **Summary**

It's evident that the methods reviewed in this article, used in conjunction with each other through the Internet, have extreme limitations and research is still in its infancy. As stated, by no means should EAPs and SAPs advocate that online programs serve as a stand-alone aftercare recovery plan.

The authors recognize that many individuals will be hesitant, or reject the idea of sharing the details of illness and disease through an online community. Meeting room doors may be closed, and treatment providers may be experienced in establishing rapport with patients, but individuals still remain concerned that the information they share will be judged or used against them. However, examining these matters and openly and honestly sharing any concerns, is not only essential to effective aftercare, but it should also be available to *anyone* who seeks assistance toward a better a quality of life. Technology makes it possible to address age-old aftercare challenges such as time, cost, and location by providing individuals with a *single* location to focus their recovery efforts.

Continuing the structure of aftercare, its flow of education and ease of communication, as well as monitoring for signs of difficulty and/or relapse, are essential to increase the probability of continued recovery and a reduction of relapses. As our world becomes more and more technological, it is imperative that we examine this future landscape and see what it has to offer us as EAPs and SAPs.

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