

Employee Benefit News

How EAPs are turning to technology to support employee mental health

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As today's mental health crisis collides with the nation's current shortage of mental health providers, the result is an emotional perfect storm. Unfortunately, that storm's unstoppable winds are blowing their way through America's workforce, strengthening in intensity as they create new challenges.

"We were already facing a growing shortage of mental health professionals before the pandemic," says Dr. John Herman, Medical Director of Mass General Brigham's Employee Assistance Program (EAP). "COVID only worsened the situation. The shortage continued, while the need for support increased significantly."

Prior to the pandemic, top-tier EAPs had already been expanding their clinical provider networks and developing new ways to broaden access to mental health services. The stress, anxiety and depression created by COVID merely heightened their efforts. For many, that involved — and continues to involve — combining the human touch with new technology.

"Our EAPs have fully embraced technology to meet the growing mental health needs of employees and their families," says John Quick, Executive Director of the National Behavioral Consortium (NBC), a think-tank trade association whose EAP members serve over 30 million lives. "Our members still offer personalized, concierge-level service, of course, but it's complemented by self-scheduling capabilities, mobile apps, self-help, and other digital innovations."

Putting more help in employees' hands

"Access is critical," says Cecile Currier, CEO of Concern EAP, a Silicon Valley provider. "Studies show that it can take people weeks or months to get a therapist appointment. We eliminate those delays. We also simplified our platform and removed any friction points that might discourage someone who is probably already discouraged. It's all about ensuring a seamless, high quality experience."

What constitutes self-service in the counseling world? Everything from self-scheduling appointments and downloading meditation apps to engaging in digital self-help platforms and providing self-assessment data.

"Employees can get almost any other service online, why wouldn't they expect to receive counseling the same way?" says Jennifer Christman, President of VetAdvisor/MyAdvisor, which provides care coordination services for veterans, physicians, first responders, and other groups responsible for the safety of others. "Younger employees in particular have no reservations about turning to the web for help and they expect to find services like self-scheduling the minute they sign on."

Building wider pathways

In many cases, self-service is simply a first step toward connecting with a therapist, virtually or in the real world. Therefore, top-tier EAPs are certain to offer multiple access paths and a variety of counseling formats.

"Our team has been implementing new technology to open up avenues of access, specifically introducing enhanced text and chat options," says Bernie Dyme, Founder and CEO of Perspectives in Chicago. "We now provide first responders the technology to reach out at the moment of crisis. They can engage and get help through instant text- and chat-based support. This has been very positively received."

In a town hall meeting this past July, several NBC members noted that it is not unusual for today's employees to forgo talking to a therapist altogether and choose text counseling or a mental health app instead. While emphasizing the value of such services, NBC participants were unanimous in their belief that the personal touch is still critical.

"I worry that members might get lost in the system if they don't get the concierge benefit of an EAP," says Maria Lund, President/COO of South Carolina's First Sun EAP," but some people may never call their EAP. Instead, they'll engage in chat, text, or video counseling without reservation, so we need to provide access in whatever way ensures they get support."

Lund's reservations are particularly true in crisis situations, such as those involving individuals with suicidal or violent thoughts. Consequently, EAPs do not rely on technology alone to provide help and rapidly escalate the most serious cases to licensed clinicians.

The key is to establish a healthy balance between the personal touch and the keyboard tapping. Take for example, the EAP at Memorial Health System in Springfield, Ill. According to Amber Olson, Memorial's Regional Director of Behavioral Health Clinical Operations, the demand for telehealth has increased to the point where only 40% of the people seeking a counselor engage in face-to-face visits. The remainder prefer telehealth sessions.

"There's something to be said for counseling in the privacy of your own home, without needing to go anywhere," says a parent coach who works with NBC members.

Contrary to that, one NBC member shared the story of a recently divorced woman who was severely depressed and felt uncomfortable talking about her personal problems online. After an unsuccessful experience using her company's video offering, she called the EAP. The woman was immediately connected to a counselor who not only listened, but scheduled a face-to-face appointment with the appropriate therapist and referred her to the company's stress management employee resource group.

Putting it simply, personal mental health challenges come with personal preferences for support. So top-tier EAPs continue to ensure the widest variety of access options.

Guiding access to other employee benefits

One EAP role that has increased considerably since the pandemic involves vetting benefit solutions on behalf of clients. Today's HR departments are faced with a growing number of vendors and programs claiming to solve their mental health dilemma. While these digital health solutions help minimize the impact of the provider shortage, they are vast in number and can feel like commodities. In addition, telling them apart is a challenge.

That's where EAPs come in. Well established EAPs are drawing on years of proven clinical and business expertise to help review, filter, and select the digital solutions that are likely to offer their clients the greatest value.

To ensure that employees access the right program at the right time, however, EAPs must track the many benefits and services a company offers, as well as a host of external resources. For example, one NBC member was able to recently recommend the Reframe app to an employee who was struggling with alcohol misuse. According to the anonymous employee:

"I knew exactly what I needed and I didn't want to talk to someone. The app helped me set a goal for cutting back, while experiencing daily, five-minute dialectic therapy lessons to deal with my

triggers. I also joined Reframe's online peer support group. If I hadn't heard about the app through my EAP, I wouldn't have known it existed."

EAPs can sometimes be so well versed in a company's benefits, they end up knowing as much as some HR/Benefits professionals. For example, one HR VP called an NBC member when she needed a memory care unit for her dad and a nearby assisted living facility for her mom. The EAP knew that the client's company offered a care management service that could provide an assessment. The assessment helped the EAP work-life team identify the right placement for both parents while also delivering legal planning and personal counseling.

"It's ironic that I work in HR and still wasn't aware of everything we offered," says the VP. "I'm so grateful our EAP knew about these services. I received all the support I needed at the most difficult time of my life."

Innovating to meet ever-shifting needs

Whether an employee enters the EAP via chat, text, email, phone, or a well-being event, the important thing is to meet people where they are. That may mean providing in-the-moment support, self-directed pathways, live counseling, digital apps, direction toward additional company benefits, or other virtual and real-world paths toward progress.

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