

# Employee Assistance Programs

## A Tool for Improving Employee Productivity, Safety, and Health

By Mark Sagor, Comprehensive EAP

**T**raumatic events can happen in the blink of an eye. On a work day, an explosion that could be seen and heard for fifty (50) miles occurred in a chemical company, a Comprehensive EAP client. Miraculously, everyone survived with no outward injuries, but it left everyone badly shaken. The entire plant was in jeopardy. Employees were traumatized by the experience and in fear of losing their jobs if the plant were to shut down. The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) was immediately available for employees, families, and management to help deal with the emotional trauma of the explosion. The EAP counselor met with individuals and small groups of workers to provide a focused and skilled response to help employees cope. For those employees who were most directly affected by the explosion and went on disability, the EAP helped them return to work after managing their fears, avoiding prolonged absence and isolation.

Was a stressed employee, not focused on the work, a factor in the explosion? A 2007 study of 411 full-time employees, commissioned by Meritain and the Partnership for Workplace Mental Health, found that employees are keenly aware that stress negatively affects them in the workplace: **94 percent believe their stress level affects job performance.**

As an employer, you want employees to perform at their optimal level, and employees want to give their best effort. However, that's not always possible. One goal of the EAP is to enhance the company's safety program by being a resource for employees to help reduce stress and maintain healthy behaviors, enabling them to stay focused on their work. Not only do EAP's help individuals cope, they also prevent stress by providing time-saving assistance.

The lines between work and family life have blurred and there is more need for help so workers can concentrate on work rather than be distracted with concerns of child or

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elder care, family stresses or illness, financial pressures, and personal problems, to name a few, which can affect the ability of employees to perform their jobs safely and effectively.

National statistics illustrate the staggering effects mental health issues have on the workplace and employees, including absenteeism, presenteeism (the problems faced when employees come to work but cannot focus), and loss of productivity and exacerbation of physical illnesses:

- The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found stress to be accountable for nearly 75 percent of all doctor visits.
- Nearly 70 percent of workers said job stress is worse than it was a decade ago, 80 percent of workers feel stress, and 40 percent view their work as very or extremely stressful.
- People with depression lose 5.6 productive hours a week due to health problems, according to a study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.
- The annual cost of presenteeism is now \$180 billion, surpassing the cost of the more well-known workplace productivity killer, absenteeism, which stands at \$118 billion, according to a recent study by the Society for Human Resource Management.

According to the 2009 Watson Wyatt *Staying@Work Report* and the Harris Employee Benefits poll, nearly half of the employers surveyed reported an increase in their workers' use of their EAPs since the beginning of the economic recession. Relationship issues, physical health, emotional health, safety, problem solving, and conflict resolution were noted as areas of significantly increased usage.

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ing. Although much less common, accidents do happen and in these situations the EAP becomes the "go to" resource to help employees cope and managers manage. We all too frequently hear the news reports of incidents of workplace violence, accidents in the workplace causing death or disability, substance abuse causing harm to other employees or customers. An effective EAP will work closely with the employer to get operations back on track after a traumatic event or disaster that affects employees.

An example of this was a situation that **Comprehensive EAP** ([www.compeap.com](http://www.compeap.com)) worked with recently. At another chemical company, a group of employees witnessed a fellow worker fall to his death. He slipped and fell while working high above the production floor. Perhaps he was depressed. Perhaps he was not focused on what he was doing due to other issues on his mind. His co-workers, who witnessed the fall, suffered from a mix of intense feelings that included both guilt and depression. The EAP worked closely with the employees to help them work through their experience and to cope with the tragedy, enabling them to begin to move on. In this particular incident it was very important for the EAP professional to meet the group on site and to respect their privacy without pressing them to share, but simply listen and acknowledge their feelings. While this provided some level of comfort, many of these employees also took advantage of individual counseling provided by the EAP. In addition, the EAP provided support to the family members of the deceased employee. Lastly, the EAP worked with the company management to help them understand what to expect from employees who were affected and to become comfortable working with them over the ensuing days and weeks.



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This kind of trauma can happen in any organization. The crisis may be different, but the results similar. In situations like these, employees panic, managers scramble, most people become paralyzed, perhaps someone calls for help, and everyone looks to someone else to take charge of the situation. No one really knows what to do. And, what happens later that day, and the next? This is not an everyday situation. An EAP takes the guesswork out of crisis response and works directly with management and employees to develop a plan that addresses the emotional fallout resulting from such a situation.

Anxiety and depressive disorders are becoming more prevalent and are costly, frequently leading to lower productivity, complaining, conflicts with co-workers, lack of attention, and poor judgment. Although managers have the responsibility to be aware of any change in performance that might create an adverse situation at work and to address this with the employee, they generally do not know how to recognize early signs of a problem, let alone have the skills or training needed to persuade the employee to get help or directly help the employee through a crisis situation. The EAP is a useful tool for the manager, from initial training on how to recognize that a potential crisis is brewing, to learning how to persuade the employee to get help before a crisis develops and stronger intervention is required.

A 2003 study conducted by Met Life Disability found that an average of one out of every 20 employees was depressed, and it is estimated that by 2020, depression will be the second most prevalent cause of disability in the world and the leading cause of lost work time. Depression alone causes an estimated 200 million lost workdays and \$44 billion in lost productivity each year.

Mental health problems affect productivity and job performance. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, for each dollar invested in an EAP, the average return on investment is \$5 to \$16. EAPs can reduce sick leave usage by 33 percent, work-related accidents by 65 percent, workers' compensation claims by 30 percent, lost time by 40 percent and grievances by 50 percent.

As we head towards the year 2011 and health care costs continue to escalate, more employers will look to adopt an EAP or integrate their existing EAP with other components of their health management strategy. When positioned correctly, an EAP can serve as an effective vehicle for managing healthcare costs and enhancing employee productivity.

Five noteworthy trends that deserve special mention:

1. EAPs with a Mental Health and Substance Abuse Gatekeeper component will be used increasingly to combat rising health care costs stemming from the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act.
2. EAPs will increasingly be integrated into an employer's pharmacy benefit to combat the rising costs of psychotropic medications.
3. EAPs will play a more active role in working with employees who file a disability claim. The Hartford ("Healthier, More Productive Employees" 2008) study found that workers who accessed their EAP while on short-term disability (STD) were twice as likely to return to work rather than go on long-term disability when compared with workers who did not use an EAP. The study also found that STD claim duration was 24 percent lower after EAP interventions for members with

cancer, musculoskeletal, and psychiatric STD claims.

4. It is not easy getting back to work after being out, and there is often a high rate of absenteeism. The employee may still be undergoing treatment or on medication, may feel out of it, concerned about performance or how s/he will be supported by colleagues who may have had to take on an added workload during the absence, or be depressed about their situation. The American Psychiatric Association estimates that 20–40 percent of all disability claims have a co-morbid psychiatric diagnosis that is often ignored.
5. Employers will require more connectivity between their EAP and the other components of their population health management strategy. It is estimated that 50–75 percent of America's healthcare costs stem from problems caused by lifestyle choices — decisions that put individuals at risk for a myriad of chronic conditions and diseases, such as diabetes, heart disease, stroke, cancers, kidney disease, lung conditions, and back, knee, and hip problems. The EAP is a key management tool to help people make healthy behavioral and lifestyle choices.

In summary, EAPs are uniquely positioned to enhance employee productivity, health, and safety, and to provide organizations with immediate support in crisis situations.

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