

Leveraging the Workplace to Combat Depression

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last several years, employee assistance programs (EAPs) have been diminished by some as simply “free counseling sessions” or a resource for handling a workplace crisis. EAPs are at times viewed as an extension of an employer’s health plan or mental health benefit. However, a refreshing shift is occurring among many forward-thinking employers that brings the EAP back to its origins—namely, as an important and valued resource that supports an organization as a whole with its expertise in how human and organizational behavior impacts health, productivity and emotional well-being. And because of the EAP’s restored role as advisor, it can help organizations tackle a growing threat to the health of the workforce: depression.

Today’s workplace is facing a growing crisis which is the human and financial toll of depression. According to the World Health Organization, depression is expected to become the leading cause of disability in the world and the second most significant cause of global disease burden by 2020. Although the annual U.S. cost of depression is approximately \$83 billion, only 25 percent of this figure is a result of direct treatment costs. The significant cost of depression for a workforce (62 percent) is due to depression-related absenteeism and decreased work performance while on the job. The cost of depression to U.S. employers is more than \$44 billion each year in lost productivity—81 percent due to reduced performance while at work. While concern over the impact of depression is not new to employers, the prevalence and associated costs with it are projected to increase. The opportunity for EAPs stems from the urgent need for new solutions to

address depression in the workplace. What is required to effectively address this issue are solutions that focus not just on individuals, but also on creating a healthy work environment that benefits the entire population.

One of the core technologies of the EAP as defined by the Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA) is that EAPs provide “consultation with, training of, and assistance to work organization leadership seeking to manage troubled employees, enhance the work environment, and improve employee job performance.” The important recognition here is that the EAP can, and should, be a valuable resource to support organizations around issues impacting the health and productivity of the workforce. Depression is among one of the most significant issues impacting employers. EAPs have long understood that the workplace is a powerful community and environment to promote behavioral change. In the case of depression, EAPs need to take an active role in consulting with organizations around how to foster a climate that encourages help-seeking behavior and an emotionally healthy workplace. Another important area of focus is designing and implementing effective screening mechanisms that ultimately result in important linkages to needed resources. The EAP’s ability to support prevention and educational activities is of paramount importance in developing a strategy for addressing depression in the workplace.

This paper outlines why addressing depression should be a business priority and outlines the business case for taking action. Moreover, it defines how an EAP should be a critical partner in supporting this effort.

Organizational Opportunities

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Despite the well-established evidence regarding the enormous toll depression takes on individuals in terms of both direct and indirect costs, many employers remain passive with respect to implementing a company-wide initiative to address depression. Company-based initiatives can have a positive effect in improving the diagnosis, detection and treatment of depression. The passivity of employers stems from the stigma and perception that many still have of mental health issues; however, the prevalence and cost of depression, including comorbidity with chronic medical disorders, makes it a condition that can no longer be ignored.

Employers can make meaningful changes that support and improve the organization immediately. An EAP can assist a customer by addressing the following key milestones of any depression prevention initiative.

- Assess the impact of depression in the workplace.
- Inventory and evaluate current programs.
- Plan the workplace depression initiative.
- Develop a communication strategy.
- Evaluate a workplace depression initiative.

To achieve an emotionally healthy workplace, an organization must align its policies, business practices and communications to support positive emotional health, and not contribute to poor health. Research has demonstrated that workers whose jobs combine high demands, low control, and low support from supervisors or co-workers are at the highest risk for psychological or physical disorders. Other specific factors that contribute to workplace stress include: a toxic work environment, excessive workload, isolation, types of hours worked, level of autonomy in the work environment, how meaningful the job is, the pace at which the employee is expected to work, shift work, role conflict, role ambiguity, lack of autonomy, career development barriers, difficult relationships with administrators and/or co-workers, managerial bullying, harassment, and organizational climate. Many of these issues are environmentally based and reflect the culture—be it positive or negative—of the organization.

In the same way that EAPs have supported organizations' efforts to shift their culture—whether it is a shift to a culture of safety, a drug-free workplace or, more recently, a culture of health, the EAP is positioned to

support this important effort toward emotional wellness and increasing help-seeking behaviors among employees.

An organization can take the following actions to address depression:

- Promote a culture of health that includes emotional wellness, not just physical wellness.
- Provide a work environment that fosters employee engagement.
- Provide symptom screening programs to detect depression.
- Educate managers and supervisors on their role as leaders in supporting a healthy workplace.
- Adopt programs and benefits to promote emotional wellness and to address depression by offering access to diagnosis and treatment.

There are significant opportunities for employers to address depression in the workplace. It is clear that the costs of not offering resources to employees far outweigh the potential costs of offering supportive initiatives and programs. The financial value of the latter to employers in terms of recovered hiring, training, and salary costs demonstrates that many employers would experience a positive return on investment from outreach and enhanced treatment of depressed workers. Additional resources, leadership that models healthy behaviors, and access to information will decrease incidents of depression in the workplace and enhance overall employee morale and productivity.

The other often hidden burden to employers related to depression is the issue of comorbidity of depression with other health or medical conditions. Mental disorders also present a significant cost to employers. Because mental disorders affect higher order functioning, mental comorbidity may result in disproportionate costs for both absenteeism and presenteeism. Depressive disorders contribute to significantly more sick days annually than any other condition. In an analysis of health claims and disability data from employees of a large corporation, persons with comorbid mental and medical conditions cost employers approximately twice as much as those with either condition alone.

ROLE OF THE EAP

So what are the core competencies and

resources available through the EAP to effectively support an employer that wants to address depression in the workplace? The resources are twofold:

- the support that can be provided to the organization in designing a workplace-based strategy
- the services and programs designed to actually engage and support employees and their family members who are suffering from depression

SUPPORTING THE ORGANIZATION

The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) recommends that early intervention to prevent or mitigate mental disability including depression take place at various points in time, including at the workplace. They suggest that policies should ensure that people with mental disorders have working conditions conducive to good mental health and avoid job strain and related productivity losses; use systematic monitoring of sick leave behaviors to detect longer-term or repeated absence patterns indicative of poor mental health; and provide employers with incentives, information, and support to help them avoid summarily dismissing workers for problems caused by a mental disorder.

Many organizations express reluctance in specifically addressing workplace depression. Perhaps this is due to the myth that if an organization addresses issues like depression or suicide it will only increase the prevalence or incidents of this problem. In addition, some employers do not know how to go about planning to address depression in the workplace or they have set other prevention priorities on health conditions where the burden of the disease is better understood. The role of the EAP includes helping an organization better understand how to communicate and discuss issues pertaining to emotional health, much in the same way they would address healthy eating or preventative check-ups. A healthy workplace culture promotes and normalizes help-seeking behaviors and offers effective means for screening, identification and treatment of depression. As an example, messaging to a predominately male employee population (typically the most difficult to engage in health issues) may include statements from senior leadership that “seeking

help is a sign of strength” or even sharing a leader’s own journey to emotional wellness. The primary areas in which an EAP can support an organization include:

- Consultation with leadership regarding:
- Program design
- Cultural assessment that identifies contributors to workplace stress
- Effective communication strategies
- Benefit design
- Role of leadership in promoting program success
- Policy review and development
- Program Implementation and Design
- Design and access to screening tools
- Access to Web content/resources and help lines
- Promotion of EAP for prevention, early identification or support
- Analysis of program effectiveness: financial impact and identification rates
- Clear interface protocol among a company’s key vendor partners
- Training of employees and managers/supervisors (online or in-person) regarding risk factors and protective factors for depression

SUPPORTING MANAGERS AND SUPERVISORS

Despite research evidence and the efforts of many employers and mental health organizations to refute them, there are several enduring myths about employees with depression—that they can’t handle stress, that they do second-rate work, that their conditions are incurable and that they are unpredictable and potentially violent. None of these is true, but if an employee senses that an employer or supervisor believes them, that could be enough to discourage a request for help. It is critical for a healthy work environment that managers and supervisors be trained and educated on the facts and myths of mental health issues, particularly depression. While the EAP often instructs managers that it is not their responsibility to diagnose those that they supervise, it is their responsibility to create an environment where help-seeking behavior is encouraged and access to company resources such as the EAP are encouraged. In the same way supervisor training has often included discussion on the signs and symptoms of substance abuse, more organizations are turning

to the EAP to provide similar training on depression. Managers and supervisors need a supportive and healthy work environment that must first be established by company leadership. But even when such an environment exists it will be the manager or supervisor who is faced with having to deal with individual issues.

SUPPORTING INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES

Only about half of the people suffering from major depression receive treatment. However, effective treatment is available, and research suggests that 80 percent of individuals with depression will improve with treatment. It is essential to recognize symptoms of depression so treatment can begin early and symptoms do not worsen. Since the workplace is where many people spend a majority of their waking hours, depression can affect productivity and other coworkers. The workplace is an ideal place to provide education to employees about mental health issues such as depression. Being informed about depression gives employees greater access to prevention, early detection and treatment. Chronic stressors, such as lack of money for basic needs, caregiving responsibilities, conflict in relationships, or dealing with long-term medical conditions, are particularly strong predictors of depression. Ironically, these are all issues the EAP can assist with if an employee or family member is aware of the EAP's existence.

The primary areas where the EAP can support employees and their families are:

- screening tools to detect the presence of depression
- promotion of resources available including the EAP, mental health treatment or link ages to community resources
- training or educational information to increase understanding of depression and information about stress management, building resilience and strengthening coping skills
- promotion of a balance between work and personal life

Depression is an issue that affects the whole family. As such, it is critical that an outreach effort to support employees and family members includes targeted communications to both the workplace and the home. Doing so will ensure that family members do not

suffer silently and that employees with depression have the support of their family necessary to promote their recovery. Similar to any health issue or concern, successful treatment for depression requires certain behavioral changes—whether it is committing to seeing a counselor or adhering to a treatment regime. Family involvement in the recovery process often helps to spark the intrinsic motivators within an individual suffering from depression.

In summary, the structure of an effective workplace depression initiative depends on the employee demographics, culture, existing programs and needs of the organization. These can be evaluated in the assessment phase to best inform the specific intervention, communication and evaluation strategies to be used. Ultimately, the goal of any workplace-based depression prevention initiative is to increase identification rates and link individuals at risk to appropriate services. Doing so will have a broad and measurable impact on the workplace from every perspective whether it is safety, disability, health care cost, absenteeism or productivity. Knowing that the projected impact depression will have on the workplace will continue to worsen; employers should take action now to promote a workplace culture that supports both the physical and emotional health of the workforce. Leveraging one's EAP is an important first step in defining and executing a strategy that aims to prevent, detect and address depression in the workplace. •