

Corporate Wellness

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Take a Whole-Health Approach to an Employee Wellness Program



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★★★★★ Employers who seek to add a wellness program to their overall Employee Assistance Program (EAP) package will want to research programs with a focus on not only a healthy body, but also a healthy mind. This can be accomplished by including a behavioral health component to the wellness program.

Emotional well-being is a critical component of most wellness programs. The Wellness Council of America (WELCOA), one of the most respected

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resources for workplace wellness programs has developed seven key benchmarks of results-oriented workplace wellness programs. One of those benchmarks is “creating a supportive, health-promoting environment” which entails managing and reducing job-related stress. The EAP is one of the strategies listed in this benchmark to address stress management. Providing a workplace wellness program demonstrates that an employer is willing to create a supportive, healthy work environment. When someone is under constant stress, it negatively affects both physical health and mental health, and like it or not, those repercussions become part of the workplace.

More and more employers understand the value of a wellness program and see the positive changes it brings to the workforce. However, experience has shown when organizations overlook the importance of mental health as a main component of a wellness program, emotional and social factors and physical challenges cannot be addressed properly.

Mental Well-Being is Equally as Important as Physical Well-Being

The term wellness describes a comprehensive, integrated approach toward improving health and productivity in our work environment. It’s a means by which employers can help employees become more aware of their overall health status and risk factors, and provide them with tools, resources and coaching to encourage them to take control of their lives and make healthy changes and choices.

Mental health support, like counselors, community groups or online resources, is sometimes seen only as a reactive solution for employees. When used proactively, along with other wellness tactics, however, it can reduce the frequency of dangerous situations such as workplace or domestic violence and the prevalence of absenteeism among staff.

A robust EAP provides quick, reliable guidance on everything from stress management to family care options so that staff can come to work with greater peace of mind. All-inclusive programs like this can have a significant impact on employees’ productivity and attitude.

Link Between Stress and Disease

Ongoing stress has been linked to a wide range of harmful conditions—obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. Approximately 80 percent of visits to a primary care physician are due to chronic stress. There is increasing

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motivation for employers to address this risk, not only for the health of your staff, but also from a cost perspective. At a time when healthcare costs continue to rise, good stress management skills can help reduce claims. A wellness program with a mental-health component can address stress from both perspectives—mind and body.

Finding the Right Balance

What is the best combination of physical health and mental health? What can employers do to keep employees engaged? Offering a program that includes both components is a good start. Yet it does not stop there. Educating employees on the benefits of using and participating in their wellness program is important throughout the work year to keep the benefits top of mind.

How it Works

With a mental-health component included, an EAP provides short-term counseling and referral for issues that are having an impact on an employee's ability to work. The EAP will either address concerns during counseling sessions, or refer the employee to appropriate community resources, counselors, and other supports. Common issues addressed by an EAP include:

- Life transitions—divorce, new job, new baby, aging parents, grief and loss, retirement
- Life challenges—drug and alcohol abuse, depression, eating disorders, mental illness
- Job stress and burnout
- Coping with difficult situations or difficult employees

The cornerstone of an EAP is strict confidentiality. The only exception is when the provider is required by law to disclose information such as if subpoenaed by a court of law, and when reasonable suspicion exists that an individual poses a danger to him/herself or others

Veterans Welcome

As more returning veterans enter the workforce, it's important to note that while a veteran may need a job, he/she also may have additional needs related to military service and/or deployment. An EAP with a mental health component, along with the support of the employer, will be a welcome benefit for most vets. An EAP counselor can assist with:

- Financial and legal referrals for the veteran and his/her family, should they

face challenges related to deployment or any other life events

- Stress management
- Confidential counseling and referrals for PTSD treatment

Safety

While mental and physical health is a vital component of a healthy workforce, a quick read of the headlines will paint a different picture of the stress our society is experiencing. Workplace and school shootings are on the rise. An EAP that extends benefits to an employee's immediate family is most welcome. Companies are beginning to recognize that spouses and dependents as well as retirees are part of the overall wellness picture. There's a trend to include spouses, domestic partners and dependents in the wellness program at reduced or no additional cost. There are better outcomes when family members support each other's wellness efforts.

Provide Incentives

One way to ensure participation in a wellness program is to provide incentives. Companies can provide a variety of incentives—employees who complete health assessments and/or exercise a certain number of minutes per week can be reimbursed for premium payments. Because the use of EAP services is confidential, it is difficult to provide incentives for mental health participation. However, providing education on a behavioral health topic during a lunch-and-learn can be rewarded. Check with the EAP provider to see if they offer webinars on topics of interest to your employees. Consider an incentive program for employees who participate.

Some Questions to Ask

When comparing benefit plans and providers, here are a few questions to ask:

- Are my employees automatically enrolled in the EAP or do they have to specifically apply for these benefits?
- Does the EAP program cover the employee only or do the benefits extend to immediate family members and/or domestic partners?
- When does coverage begin?
- What additional cost is there to my employees?

While difficult to measure, the benefits of a behavioral health component in a wellness program will be evident in employee productivity, morale, safety and work quality—all aspects of a healthy workplace.

About the Author



Amy Haft, senior account manager, is a Certified Employee Assistance Professional (CEAP) and certified Wellness Program Coordinator. Amy oversees program promotion, implementation and training for FEI's corporate customers and has extensive experience planning, designing and managing employee programs in corporate, non-profit and academic settings. Amy also is the wellness product manager for FEI and currently facilitates the Wellness Connections team for the Alliance for Children & Families.

FEI Behavioral Health offers flexible solutions for the full spectrum of workforce resilience goals, from EAP and wellness to crisis preparedness and management. Partnering with a wide range of corporations, government entities and non-profits, FEI is a social enterprise wholly owned by the Alliance for Children and Families, a national network of nearly 500 human-serving organizations. www.feinet.com

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