



# Employee Assistance Programs for a New Generation of Employees

## Defining the Next Generation

*The U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy provides national leadership in developing and implementing policies, practices, and innovative strategies that support hiring, advancing, and retaining employees with disabilities, including those with mental health needs.*

**Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)** are worksite-based programs and/or resources designed to benefit both employers and employees. EAPs help businesses and organizations address productivity issues by helping employees identify and resolve personal concerns that affect job performance.

Through prevention, identification, and resolution of these issues, EAPs enhance employee and workplace effectiveness and are a vital tool for maintaining and improving worker health and productivity, retaining valued employees, and returning employees to work after illnesses or injuries.





Employers have found that proactive, preventive efforts to help employees identify and resolve personal issues before they have serious medical, family, and/or workplace consequences make financial and business sense.

***EAPs have been shown to contribute to:***

- Decreased absenteeism;
- Reduced accidents and fewer workers compensation claims;
- Greater employee retention;
- Fewer labor disputes; and
- Significantly reduced medical costs arising from early identification and treatment of individual mental health and substance use issues.

EAPs are unique in that they provide services to individual employees and family members and to the employer/work organization as a whole.

***EAP services to individuals include:***

- Mental health-related services and referrals;
- Drug and alcohol-related services and referrals;
- Services and referrals related to personal issues such as divorce and parenting;
- Information on work/life supports, such as

caregiving for elderly parents and financial planning;

- Wellness and health promotion services, such as smoking cessation and weight reduction; and
- Work-related supports like career counseling.

***EAP services to organizations include:***

- Education on handling mental health, stress, and addictions in the workplace;
- Addressing workplace violence;
- Safety and emergency preparedness;
- Guidance on communicating in difficult situations, such as mergers, layoffs, or when employees die on the job;
- Absence management; and
- Meeting needs of specific workers, such as returning veterans.

Many employers today are actively integrating services and resources to support overall employee physical and mental health, expanding EAP services to include disease management and preventive health, and coordinating with a broad range of other work/life and human resource initiatives.



## Mental Health Perceptions of Younger Employees

Employers are increasingly recognizing an opportunity to reach young employees with EAP services—particularly with regard to mental health. Compared to older workers, younger employees seem to worry less about stigma when asking for help on mental health and substance use issues, appearing to approach EAPs much as they would other resources they need to achieve success in their jobs or resolve relationship issues. They also seem more familiar with mental health issues and have often already searched online for information before they call EAPs.

In 2007, ODEP met with employers and employee assistance professionals as part of a qualitative research study on addressing the mental health needs of younger employees through EAPs. The information and anecdotes they provided were rich with stories of younger workers approaching EAPs with less reticence than their older co-workers, actively seeking information on mental health issues, and energetically pursuing solutions. Particularly significant for employers were discussions on linking EAP resources for younger workers to broader employer initiatives for attracting, engaging, and retaining Millennials in the workforce—young adults between the ages of 18 and 30.

## Targeting Millennials with EAP Services

To attract and retain Millennials, and to better serve their mental health needs, many employers and employee assistance professionals are beginning to develop innovative and content-rich EAP messages for young employees in multiple traditional and new media formats. Strategies for ensuring that EAPs are reaching younger workers include the following:

**Increased use of technology** – Younger workers are generally very comfortable with (and often

inseparable from) technology. Efforts to make EAP services more accessible include online, interactive assessments of drug and alcohol use, stress levels, and depression; online, interactive scenarios that teach managers to assess troubling employee situations, including when to refer to EAPs, contact human resources, call the police, or make physician referrals; webinars and podcasts on various subjects; text messaging to facilitate communication among subscribed members; and e-mails providing non-clinical support, such as coaching.

**New promotional materials** – EAPs are redesigning their Web sites, posters, brochures, wallet cards, and other printed material to be more appealing to younger workers. They are using streamlined fonts, brighter colors, more modern design, and more contemporary messages.

**New topics for seminars** – EAPs are finding that certain topics for brown bag lunches and other presentations tend to attract younger workers and they are updating their seminars to be more appealing to Millennials. Topics on time management, financial issues, and stress are reported as popular with younger workers.

**Creative “take-aways”** – Many EAPs participate in employer-sponsored health or benefits fairs informing employees of available services. Because some people have a natural reluctance to visit a booth associated with “personal problems,” EAPs generally try to have activities or small gifts to attract people to their booth. Stress dots (small stick-on dots that measure galvanic skin response to show stress levels) are proving very popular with younger employees, as are games, squeeze toys, and other stress reduction gifts.

**Work/life coordination** – EAPs are increasingly involved in administering and promoting work/life programs, such as telework and flexible schedules. When EAP, human resources, and work/life services are effectively integrated, a single assessment may help a person find both financial counseling services and help dealing

with depression. The idea is to encourage young workers to seek assistance for a wide range of issues, including mental health and addiction problems.

**Supervisor training** - An orientation for supervisors is a standard practice for EAPs. In addition to the usual discussion familiarizing supervisors and managers with the range of services EAPs offer, some are now offering specific training on “Managing Employees from Different Generations” which are proving popular and particularly helpful.

**Mediation services** - Some EAPs find that offering mediation and conflict resolution services gives them a good entrée with

younger workers who may be having difficulty adjusting to the expectations of their managers or co-workers.

**Retention strategies** - Some EAPs are coordinating with human resource efforts to retain younger workers. The visibility of EAPs in strategic workforce planning can positively contribute to employee perceptions of EAPs as “go to” resources for advice about workplace and personal issues. For example, some employers have worked with their EAPs to design programs for employees with zero to five years of service that offer a variety of professional and personal development activities to create friendships and supports for new employees.

For decades, EAPs have demonstrated their value, both to the individuals whose lives they have improved and to the employers and work organizations that benefit from having healthy workers. As Millennial generation adults enter the workplace, they bring with them an array of unique personal concerns as well as some of the same mental health and substance use issues that employers have been addressing for many years. By developing new strategies and resources, and by strengthening partnerships and linkages with work/life, human resources, health and wellness, absence and disability management, and accommodation efforts, EAPs will be even more effective in assisting this new generation in becoming productive workers in the 21st Century workplace.



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