



HOW VALUABLE IS AN EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM?

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I recall the excited post of a practice manager who shared that *“just this weekend one of my staff used our EAP to intervene in her thoughts of suicide.”* Her practice’s decision to offer an employee assistance program (EAP) had just saved the life of one of her team. Priceless!

WHAT EXACTLY IS AN EAP AND WHAT DOES IT DO?

The main idea behind employee assistance programs is to offer help in times of crisis. These programs originally began as an addendum sitting outside traditional health insurance by offering drug and alcohol abuse support. However, as employers soon discovered, their personnel were encountering challenges beyond these two problems. These other issues were far more common and producing negative effects on job performance. EAPs expanded to offer support to staff members suffering with:

- ▶ Relationship issues with team members or significant others
- ▶ Crisis intervention
- ▶ Childcare or eldercare
- ▶ Eating disorders
- ▶ Addictions to drugs, alcohol or gambling
- ▶ Psychological or psychiatric problems including stress, anxiety, depression, burnout or compassion fatigue
- ▶ Financial coaching
- ▶ Legal problems
- ▶ Human resource support for managers

adverse life circumstances mental health financial problems



Human resource managers found when team members were facing adverse life circumstances, mental health issues or financial problems, their attention to their work lagged, call-outs increased and even physical health diminished.

This decreased performance caused fellow staff to have to take up the slack, which in turn increased their stress and fatigue. The physical health ramifications resulted in increased health insurance premiums, causing the business to suffer in multiple ways. The process was much like a dog chasing its tail, with a vicious cycle of negative actions draining the culture and energy of the group. EAPs are designed to be the intervention that helps stop the cycle.

An EAP is an employer-sponsored program that offers services or referrals to outside professionals to help employees deal with personal problems. Much like health insurance will provide access to doctors for physical ailments, EAPs are a conduit for staff members to reach out to experts in other aspects of life. Often, managers or practice owners find themselves in the tenuous situation of dealing with a team member's private problems.

Staff will confess financial difficulties, home life challenges, or issues with mental health such as anxiety or depression to their supervisors. The fact that a manager can have that excellent level of trust with staff is a testament to their leadership, but the truth is *the manager is not trained to deal with these topics*. Making a misstep could lead to even more severe crises for this employee. Having an EAP is an excellent way to support this person without expecting

the manager to fill this role. Much of a manager's job is managing minor employee infractions or predicaments, but there is a time when higher levels of experience and credentials are necessary to be of real service.

An EAP provides outside counselors, resources, and referrals to assist employees and their family members. Keep in mind that living with a family member with challenges can have a detrimental effect on your staff member too. Any EAP benefits received by employees or family members remain confidential. This means that while the employer pays for the service, they get no direct notification of the employee's specific use of the service. Due to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) regulations, there is complete confidentiality between the third-party EAP provider and the employee.

All EAPs provide a predetermined number of counseling referral sessions, typically one to three, at no cost to the employee. These sessions are designed to fully assess the issue before advising the person to a specific resource, therapist, or service. Most EAPs do not offer long-term counseling; rather, they direct the employee toward services that are designed to be long-term solutions. There are commonly agreed-to requirements that all EAPs have contained within their program. The Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA) guidelines state that all EAPs must have written policies which address consistency in service and program offerings, customer confidentiality (including anonymity from the employer when employees are self-seeking services), and a sufficient support staff of trained employee assistance

professionals who are available to support customers' needs.

A practice embracing EAPs should have a written policy for two reasons. First, it allows your employees to be aware of what services are offered so they can utilize the program. Second, it assists employers in consistently administering the EAP benefits to their team. The policy should be clearly written in plain language so your staff can easily understand what benefits are offered and how to simply access them. They should also have multiple modalities for communication such as website, phone, text or video chat.

Once the program is in place it is important that employees begin to access the tool. Most commonly the employee will self-evaluate needs and reach out on their own to the EAP. It is also usual for family, friends or co-workers to suggest the EAP to a person they perceive needs help. These are ideal uses. It is

also possible that as a supervisor you may refer a staff member to the EAP when performance issues are noted and coaching is needed. Mandatory referrals may certainly be justified; however, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) reports that recent case law has shown that formal EAP referrals have created legal burdens on employers under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Specifically, plaintiffs' attorneys have argued that *by referring the employee to the EAP the employer did indeed perceive that its client had a disability* (whether it was accurate or not). Note that these types of interpretations, temporary or not, or accurate or not, could become legally knotty should the employer then decide to discipline or dismiss the employee.

services/referrals

confidential

coaching

Continued

beneficial

Practices have various means of contracting EAP services. The most common is the **fixed fee** service where a dollar rate per number of staff is the model. The fee is consistent regardless of the actual use. **Fee-for-service** contracts are where the business contracts directly with an EAP provider. In this case, the employer pays for only what is used for the service. These are the two most used contracts in veterinary medicine for independent practice owners. Within larger practice groups you will often find **management sponsored** EAPs where the groups take on the hiring of experts to create their own team for EAP delivery. Rarer are **consortium contracts** where groups of businesses join together to contract for third-party experts. This could happen with Chamber of Commerce groups or other associations. Unions will also develop EAPs, but because they are extremely rare in veterinary medicine we can focus on other methods.

affordable

Of course, the benefits sound wonderful, but can a small business afford the cost? According to data found at <https://www.you-can-learn-basic-employee-rights.com/>, the average cost per year per employee for an EAP is:

1-25 employees.....	\$50.00
26-100 employees	\$36.70
101-250 employees.....	\$32.70

These certainly seem reasonable, but can a business see return on this investment? According to Cory Friedman of Alera Group, which is a preferred provider of EAPs for the Veterinary Hospital Managers Association, practices see benefits from:

- ▶ Lower health care costs (for some employers)
- ▶ Fewer disability claims
- ▶ Less absenteeism
- ▶ Higher productivity and focus
- ▶ Improved employee morale
- ▶ Fewer workplace accidents
- ▶ Higher retention (saves the cost of hiring and training a replacement)

satisfaction

But will teams really use this service or is it only for one or two percent of the group? Data from EAP provider Curalinc shows between 9% and 14% of employees in participating practices have utilized the service this year, with 98.25% getting resolution within the EAP. A heavy majority were employees who needed assistance with personal stress, anxiety and depression. After all, it is 2020! Legal issues were also a place where EAPs were frequently utilized. When participating employees were asked about their job satisfaction by EAP providers, 84% of respondents said it was good or excellent. When employees are satisfied with their jobs, they tend to stay.

There are many options for EAP providers. Some programs are even free when offered through such resources as local university master's degree programs. However, free is not always wise when asking inexperienced students to coach challenging life problems, so seek a well-established provider and feel confident in paying for credentials and experience. Members of VHMA.org do have EAP providers in their member benefit network, so start there if you are a member. More education can be found on the Employee Assistance Professionals Association website at <https://www.eapassn.org/>. Since 83% of companies in the U.S. now offer EAPs (SHRM's 2019 Employee Benefit Survey data) it seems obvious that they are finding benefit in greater employee satisfaction, reduced turnover and most importantly the well-being of their team members.

"Take care of your team and they will take care of your business" has long been my mantra because **it works!** EAPs are one way to take good care of the people who care for your patients. ■

