

# What is an Employee Assistance Program?

By Ron Hesslein, Director, LifeSynch Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

Now more than ever, employees can be distracted by so many issues that affect their concentration and productivity. Likewise, managers are struggling to conduct true performance management and are happy to have employees who can just get the job done and make it through the day.

In such times, the topic of Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) comes up more frequently: “Can’t EAP help?” “Don’t those programs offer a bunch of stuff to make life easier?” “What do they actually do anyway?”

## What does an EAP do?

The answer has varied over time. The history of EAP parallels how employers have viewed the connection between mental health and workplace productivity. What started as largely peer intervention for alcohol problems impacting the workplace has morphed into all kinds of help for all kinds of issues that take employees and management off task at work.

Today, an effective EAP provides:

For employees and members of their household

- Employer-paid resources like financial and legal guidance and help finding childcare and eldercare
- Employer-paid assessments and brief counseling via phone or face to face with professional and/or peer counselors for issues like marital problems, depression, anxiety, parenting teenagers, grief and more

For organizations

- Consultation regarding specific employee situations and organizational concerns
- Group services and training to reduce risk, facilitate optimal teamwork and address disruptive workplace behavior

EAP is not the only way to do many of these things, but it is the only quick, pre-paid, readily available workplace-based option to begin addressing anything and everything that comes up. If your EAP doesn’t resolve the issue, it must, at a minimum, get you to the next level of resources that can further its resolution.

## Who is it for?

Any reasonably well-performing employee with recently declining performance is almost guaranteed to be having personal issues, whether psychological, marital, familial, financial, career or substance related. Oftentimes, another member of the household has the issue that is impacting or distracting the employee.

Since teamwork is critical in today’s workplace, these issues invariably impact co-workers and then the bottom line. At a minimum, any employee with declining performance should be reminded of his or her EAP and how to access it. From there, the

# What is an Employee Assistance Program?

employee is responsible for addressing the issue and this process will frequently, but not always, begin to be reflected in performance improvement.

Note that because household members are usually able to use the EAP, regardless of other benefit eligibility, an organization's promotional campaign for EAP must include efforts to reach into the home, such as an annual home mailing with a refrigerator magnet to keep EAP top of mind: "Should I call the pizza place or the EAP?"

Similarly, any supervisor or manager faced with this situation should be comfortable with calling their EAP, asking to speak with a consultant and kicking it around a bit. The response should focus on how to approach the employee, how to separate personal from performance issues, and bringing in human resources, if they are not yet involved.

In certain more dramatic situations, the employee is not fit to be in the workplace, either because of safety concerns or highly disruptive behavior. The EAP can provide guidance, resources, compliance monitoring and return-to-work facilitation in such cases.

Furthermore, whenever organizational events create concern about how the population will be impacted (e.g., trauma in the workplace, reductions in force, re-engineering, mergers and acquisitions) the EAP should be consulted. "What can you do?" "What can you add?" "What else should we be thinking about?" These basic questions will frequently lead to at least some additional insights. And, it's pre-paid by your employer, so call.

## **Not Just a Benefit or Entitlement**

Any organization that has positioned the EAP as just "a few free counseling sessions" either before or instead of the mental health benefit is missing out on the added value available from the EAP.

Even beyond the organizational services that add value, today's EAP can be positioned as a "portal" to a world of self care. Self care and consumer-directed care are keys to prevention and EAP can serve as an alternative entryway alongside wellness and incentive programs.

True EAP practitioners are not just interested in the issue that led to making the appointment. Effective EAP counseling will include a "systems check," not unlike the way the local garage does their 12-point inspections while they change your oil. The garage might want to charge you extra for the two things they found, but in the case of the EAP, there won't be any extra charges because it's pre-paid by your employer.

## **Interested in EAP Services?**

To learn if you qualify for EAP/work-life services through your workplace, please review your benefits or contact your human resources department.

# What is an Employee Assistance Program?

If you are interested in purchasing EAP/work-life services for your organization, please call 800-240-8388.

## About the Author

Ron Hesslein, MA, CEAP  
EAP Director



Ron Hesslein has more than two decades of clinical, organizational and employee assistance experience. Before joining Humana, Ron was director of EAP services for Wellpoint and vice president of Resource Management consultants. He has spoken extensively on topics such as stress management, workplace violence, substance abuse and the effects of chronic illness on families. Corporate audiences have included AlliedSignal Inc., Novartis Pharmaceuticals Corp., U.S. Customs Service, and Warner Lambert Co.

Ron holds a bachelor's degree from Northwestern University and a master's degree from Wesleyan University. He completed his internship in clinical psychology at East Orange VA Medical Center, where he specialized in behavioral medicine. Ron is a Certified Employee Assistance Professional and a member of the Employee Assistance Professionals Association. He has held various EAPA chapter positions, including president of the Granite State Chapter.