

# Human Resource Executive®

Special Report: Benefits



## Detoxifying Depression

**As the uncertain economy continues to batter the psyches of American workers, getting them the help they need to battle depression is even more vital to the well-being of both the employee and the organization.**

BY MICHAEL O'BRIEN

**W**ith his extensive background as a licensed therapist and mental-health clinician, Kenneth Dolan-DelVecchio knows, all too well, the difficulties associated with reaching out to people in need of depression related counseling in the workplace.

"People just don't like to admit to any kind of mental-health concern," he says. "But we're trying to detoxify the fact that depression is a *major* health concern. Between 9 percent and 11 percent of the general population will be diagnosed with depression at some point in their lives."

So, as vice president of health and wellness at Newark, N.J.-based Prudential for the past 12 years, his group has been trying to widen the scope of depression help that's being offered by the company. And that includes reaching out to a demographic that is deeply affected by depression, but less likely to do anything proactive about it: men.

"Attendees at our depression awareness workshops and Webinars have been predominantly women, but research tells us that men suffer from depression as often as women," says Shirley Cresci, director of the company's employee-assistance program. "Knowing this fact, we wanted to share information with men in a format that would resonate with them, so we decided to present a Webinar facilitated by three male EAP counselors to remove some of the discomfort around the topic."

As a result, the recent Webinar, "What Every Man Should Know about Depression," was attended by more than 50 people—more than half of them men—according to Cresci, who adds that some of the men who attended also made appointments to speak with a counselor after the session. Many of the men in attendance also agreed to join an e-mail list to receive additional information related to men's health issues.

Although EAPs, Webinars and counseling sessions aren't free, the costs associated with depression are larger than many employers may realize, says Thomas Parry, president of the Integrated Benefits Institute in San Francisco. The IBI recently released a report, *The Full Costs of Depression in the Workforce*, which found that companies may not be seeing a full picture of the total cost of depression because they are only focusing on medical and pharmaceutical costs.

"Employers look at their claims data to see [their depression-related] costs, but if people aren't even getting help, then they won't be in those numbers," Parry says.

In fact, depression is estimated to cost U.S. organizations between \$17 billion and \$44 billion each year in lost workdays, according to the MetLife Disability Group. Meanwhile, the National Institute of Mental Health has determined that providing a minimal level of enhanced care for employees' depression would result in a cumulative savings to employers of \$2,898 per 1,000 workers over five years. So, while the means to combat depression are constantly evolving—from the widespread use of health-risk assessments to determine who needs help, to digital-

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coaching programs to help them once they've acknowledged the problem—one thing remains constant: The need for organizations to help depressed employees is both real and immediate.

### Help in the Digital Age

While EAPs and other in-house programs have long been the standard in dealing with depression in the workplace, 21st-century technology is making digital inroads in helping companies reach employees who might otherwise slip through the cracks.

Mental Health America, an Alexandria, Va.-based nonprofit that advocates for greater mental-health awareness, launched a Web site last year that serves as the centerpiece of its "Live Your Life Well" campaign. The site, [LiveYourLifeWell.org](http://LiveYourLifeWell.org), offers a wealth of information and research on combating stress, along with a series of tools and links to additional information for people who are feeling depressed or who are concerned about the mental health of others close to them.

Another organization, HealthMedia, an Ann Arbor, Mich.-based wellness and prevention company, offers an online service designed to help "sub-threshold" people, or those who may not be detected by a healthcare system's antennae but are still experiencing symptoms that may affect them and their work, says Director of Behavioral Health Science Rich Bedrosian.

The company's Overcoming Depression self-help program is designed to emulate a behavioral-health coaching session—only without the coach—to deliver a personalized depression management plan. It was developed by a multidisciplinary group of professionals, including psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and psychiatric social workers, he says.

"What we're doing is reaching out and getting to some of the people who are never otherwise going to come forward for treatment," he says. "The issue of stigma still prevents a lot of people from coming forward."



Bedrosian says employees are more likely to disclose a high-risk mental-health issue such as depression, substance abuse or sexual abuse while online instead of in a face-to-face setting. Obviously, a digital solution won't solve employees' mental-health problems by itself, but it will at least get them pointed in the right direction, he says.

"Studies are showing that younger workers are more comfortable talking online rather than face-to-face," says David Groves, director of worldwide wellness and health promotion at New Brunswick, N.J.-based Johnson & Johnson Global Health Services, which recently rolled out Overcoming Depression to its 40,000 U.S. employees and their family members. "This program offers them a wealth of behavioral-change ideas" without making them sit down for a potentially uncomfortable meeting with a stranger.

"A good analogy is to compare what we're doing with an ATM machine versus a bank," says Bedrosian. "We're not taking the place of face-to-face interaction; there's a lot you can do with an ATM that you don't need face-to-face contact for, but there are other things that you do need to go into the bank to do."

Employees can be referred to the program in several ways, Bedrosian says.

"They may be identified through a health-risk assessment and then receive an e-mail communication; they would have opted in to receive these types of communications to protect their privacy," he says. "They may learn about the program through some type of communication" including posters, e-mail educational campaigns or information on the company Web site; or they may be

# Depression A 'Cornerstone' of EAPs

Employee-assistance programs have been around for decades, offering employers a prepaid way to connect employees with resources to help them deal with a range of issues that can adversely affect them.

Dan McCarthy, chief clinical officer for Magellan Health Services, an Avon, Conn.-based employee-assistance-program provider, says his company's focus has long been on depression.

"Depression in the workplace, along with substance abuse, have been the cornerstones of our program for years," he says, adding that depression is "always the No. 1 treated condition in both EAPs and managed behavioral-health programs."

An active EAP within an organization can offer a variety of positive influences on a company, including being a cost-savings tool for the employee, he says.

"One of the real virtues is that it's prepaid by the employer, so there's no need for a co-pay by the employee," he says.

But, on the other side of the coin, one of the biggest hurdles in gaining EAP acceptance in the workplace is the inability to truly measure program effectiveness, he adds.

"In today's economy, productivity is really everything," he says. "We have invested in a [proprietary] clinical-outcome instrument to measure the EAP's effectiveness."

Since it was brought online in 2007, the tool measures the changes in an EAP user's behavioral symptoms and emotional signals, as well as productivity, vitality and other metrics in order to get a better read on the program's effectiveness.

"I get to actually see the data that shows people in the EAP

are getting better," he says. "What's been great about this tool is when you're talking to companies and they're talking about belt-tightening, this is a great way to show value," he says.

One of those companies is Brinker International, a Dallas-based casual-dining company that owns and operates the Chili's and Romano's Macaroni Grill brands, among others. Virginia Nisbet, the director of benefits for the company, says it offers Magellan's EAP to its 75,000 salaried and hourly workers, many of whom are millennial-age wait staff.

"A lot of our team members see their co-workers as family, so it's really important for them to feel like they're supported like a family," she says.

Due to the nature of the restaurant industry, Nisbet says, there are challenges to getting high participation rates from employees.

"We're in a high-turnover industry, and you can't just put [EAP information] out there once," she says. "You have to reinforce it continually." Nisbet says the company constantly puts out fliers and enrollment materials in break rooms and tells managers to remind their staffs of the importance of using an EAP when stress and depression may loom. With an EAP participation rate hovering at around 13 percent, Nisbet says, top-level management must do whatever it takes to get the word out.

"The more resources and approaches you try, the better it's likely going to be in terms of the outcome," she says.

referred by a coach or counselor, either in person or by phone.

When an employee initially logs onto the online program, he or she goes through an evaluation of lifestyle habits. That information is then used to set attainable goals customized for each participant, which can include changing negative thought patterns through the use of cognitive behavioral tools and techniques, relaxation exercises and recommendations for changes in lifestyles and habits.

To that end, the company recently rolled out HealthMedia's program to all of its employees.

"We know we're picking up people [with this program] who are depressed and just haven't been diagnosed," says Groves.

## "A Fuzzy Concept"

Regardless of the program a company chooses, the science behind it must be rigorously tested if it is to be successful for an organization, says David Shern, president and CEO of Mental Health America.

One of the most frustrating aspects of dealing with depression in the workplace is that the disease itself defies simple

definition, says Dolan-Del Vecchio.

"It's important to recognize that depression itself is a pretty fuzzy concept," he says. "It's not like a broken leg, where there's a very clear physiological understanding. It's more of a pattern of behavior that we understand as having a pretty definite physiological basis, but [depression] also could be the result of extraordinary stress paired with certain vulnerabilities."

In order to shed more light on the dark areas of the mind that depression affects, Prudential encourages its employees to fill out annual health-risk assessments, and it uses a monetary-reward incentive program to ensure a high participation rate.

"We build in assessments of depression and stress into our HRA," he says. "We strongly encourage people to complete an HRA every year, and we offer a \$150 stipend [which is added to an employee's check] for taking it."

The company began offering the reward in 2007—when it wanted to get at least 70 percent of employees taking it—and Dolan-Del Vecchio says the participation rate is now about 75 percent. When an employee's responses to the assessment indicate signs

of depression, the assessment immediately points him or her in the direction of the company's EAP, he says.

"If you score moderately high for depression or stress, you'll get a recommendation to use the EAP," he says. "A prompt will ask you to consider using resources that may" help alleviate some of the symptoms."

Prudential also offers a short, online "Screening for Mental Health" service that's specific to depression, alcohol abuse and post-traumatic stress disorder. The service is designed to provide quick results and recommendations for further treatment, which Dolan-Del Vecchio says can give users the impetus they may need for getting themselves help. Approximately 1,400 individuals complete the screening annually.

"For some people, that can be very significant," he says. "A very concrete device has given them the permission to pursue treatment."

Prudential recently embarked on an effort to measure the effects of the program.

"Prudential is working toward measuring the extent to which our programs and

services reduce risk factors associated with depression,” he says. “It’s widely accepted that certain emotional and mental health risk factors, if left unaddressed, will lead to depression. We are beginning to track these factors from aggregate health-risk assessment data, but this capability is relatively new.”

To address the hesitation some employees may have when it comes sharing sensitive personal information with a company-run EAP, Prudential also offers an external EAP service, as well as emphasizes the confidential nature of all EAP services.

“We advise employees that all records are treated as protected health information, so we follow the very rigorous HIPAA guidelines in protecting them,” says Cresci. “We don’t provide [personal] information to anyone who asks, and that includes confirming that we have met with someone.”

### Workplace Strategy

The idea of offering employee assistance for mental-health problems is not a new one at Peoria, Ill.-based heavy equipment maker Caterpillar Inc., says John C. Pompe, the manager of the company’s disability and behavioral-health programs.

“Caterpillar has had EAP-type programs in place since the late 1930s,” he says, adding that they historically focused on alcohol problems. The company’s efforts against depression have been evolving over the past five to 10 years, “particularly as the medical literature has matured to articulate the impact depression has on the workplace.”

While Caterpillar invests heavily in the health of its workers—the self-insured company spends approximately \$650 million per year on healthcare for its 56,000 U.S. employees, retirees and their spouses—he acknowledges that, just like the many people who suffer from depression themselves, “we are trying to figure out the best path for us.”

One of the working assumptions on which Caterpillar’s workplace behavioral health strategy is based is that the company has a role to play in the healing process, Pompe says.

“We can’t completely rely on the mental-healthcare-delivery system and the consumer to ensure the problem is

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HEALTHMEDIA

resolved,” he says. “A workplace strategy is needed.”

To that end, Pompe says, all of the company’s programs have been crafted and are managed internally to ensure the best fit for employees.

In addition to offering a variety of depression-related programs that include education and prevention, early intervention, treatment, medical-leave management and chronic-disease management, Pompe says, the company trains its supervisors to be alert to potential mental-health problems in the workforce.

“Supervisory referrals to these programs are extremely important,” he says. “Supervisors and co-workers are typically the first to see problems.”

Caterpillar’s managers are given specific training on the topic of depression in the workplace, through which they’re told to look for changes in their people as well as patterns and the severity of signals that could be seen as cries for help. Such signals include: poor or declining work quality, changes in hygiene or appearance that are inappropriate for the workplace, and complaints of getting too much or too little sleep.

“First and foremost, we stress that managers must stay focused on work-related behaviors,” he says. “We draw a very clear line to have supervisors avoid making any decision based on their perception of a medical condition.”

Dolan-Del Vecchio agrees it’s important to remind managers that while it’s crucial to keep an eye out for potentially depressed employees, it’s not their job to attempt to diagnose a problem.

“We tell managers: ‘You’re not a security expert and you’re not a behavioral expert—ask for help when



you see something,’” he says. “It’s not going to be a mark against you if you consult with the EAP, it’s actually going to be a mark in your favor. Asking for help, as a manager or as an employee with a health concern, is an important skill. It doesn’t mean you’re incompetent. It shows that you believe in your competence enough that you can invite others to share their expertise and not feel lessened by that.”

Ultimately, he says, any organization’s depression-related offerings should be designed to head off problems.

“So much of what we try to do is preventive and proactive,” he says. “Before you get to a point where you lose the ability to function, you will be aware of the kinds of options that are available to you to interrupt the escalation of depression.”

And for those managers of employees who have already succumbed to depression, Linda Weaver, a Phoenix-based principal at Mercer’s health and business practice, advises that they keep an open mind when it comes to the power of rehabilitation.

“One of the things I always tell HR executives is that depression treatment works,” she says. “I sometimes feel like people have this view that you need to go for treatment once a week for the rest of your life, and that’s not true. If you can get people the right treatment at the right time, then it’s going to be effective.”

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