

# WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOUR EAP



*While counselling services still make up the majority of the usage, a number of lesser-known resources are also available to help employees with a range of needs*

*By Jennifer Paterson*

On one of the top floors of a non-descript building in downtown Toronto, Morneau Shepell Ltd.'s care access centre representatives are fielding intake calls, the first step in helping Canadian employees get help through their employee assistance program.

Visually, it's a typical call-centre environment, but the "magic happens on the phone," says Lynn Pike, vice-president of contact centres, intake and clinical services. The company has 2,500 counsellors at its six call centres across Canada. They're available day and night and can provide services in 146 languages while answering about 600,000 calls each year.

Across a potential 35 core issues people might be calling to address, about 60 per cent of calls have to do with the top five areas: relationship issues, personal and workplace stress, depression and anxiety. Through Morneau Shepell's intake services, urgent or crisis situations — which make up about three per cent of calls — get priority. The non-urgent requests for counselling are categorized by issue,

counsellor preference, language and modality, which could include in-person, telephone, video or online group sessions. The variety of options is reflective of the younger generations in the workforce and an increased focus on technology, says Pike.

Clearly, employee assistance programs have evolved since their introduction in 1968 by the Addiction Research Foundation of Ontario. They still predominantly cover counselling-related issues today, but there are a number of lesser-known resources that employers and their employees may not be aware of.

## **The evolution of the EAP**

Defining an employee assistance program as a counselling service isn't wrong, but it's also much more than that, says George Shipley, vice-president and Canadian national commercial leader for health and benefits at Aon Hewitt. "If we define it as a counselling service, we're making people think they have to be sick or have a problem before they access an EAP,

**“It really is a broad application of services to your direct and extended family.”**

**ARE EAPS WORTH THE INVESTMENT?**

Transcom’s spending on its employee assistance program is \$2.30 per employee each month, regardless of whether they use it. In 2016, that added up to a total spend of \$25,000 on the program, says Transcom’s Trish Robb.

“This is such a small cost to the business,” she says, noting the company also sees solid use of the program at 17 per cent of employees.

Aon Hewitt’s George Shipley says that as more providers enter the market, competition has driven prices down. “Now, employers expect EAPs to be nickels and dimes,” he says, suggesting the cost of employee assistance programs is nominal in comparison to other parts of employers’ benefits offerings. “It’s inexpensive when you look at the cost of other things, but the value isn’t being recognized. Price is often based on utilization . . . If your people aren’t using it, it could cost you 10 times more.”

**EMPLOYEE VIEWS ON EAPS**

**11%**

Average usage rate of an EAP

**39%**

Percentage of plan members who rate their EAP as excellent or very good

Source: 2016 Sanofi Canada health-care survey

which is not true. It’s a resource for employees to access with regards to any number of potential issues or challenges they’re trying to navigate in their own personal and work lives.”

Services have evolved alongside workplace changes and employees’ needs, says Jamie Marcellus, president of HumanaCare, a provider of employee assistance programs. “It’s really a service to deal with all those complex issues. . . . Where we’re seeing that evolve is employers are looking for as much as they can out of the services they provide.”

The well-known options available to employees include counselling and resources to help with issues like personal or emotional problems, marriage and family difficulties, stress, anxiety and addiction. Alan King, president and chief operating officer at another provider, Workplace Options, says the use of a company’s program includes both traditional counselling and practical needs. “Clearly, we still have a large number of people who may be ringing in because they’re stressed or have suffered a loss or their relationship may be in a difficult spot and they need the help of a counsellor. What we also know is, typically, there are practical things that might be causing stress. If we can actually help solve the problem that’s causing the stress, then we do a better job.”

**Lesser-known offerings**

The bulk of the use of Transcom WorldWide’s program usage is face-to-face counselling, according to Trish Robb, senior human resources country manager for Canada. The next biggest use is for

the program’s concierge-style services, such as legal support and help with childcare and elder care.

The organization tends to push a lot of its communications towards those services, says Robb, noting the approach helps to shift the negative perception people often have about employee assistance programs towards a more positive impression. “Counselling is great . . . We’re big advocates for mental health and being very open about that, but it’s also really important to say, ‘You don’t have to have a problem to use it. Maybe you need help to find a camp or a daycare. It’s there to help make your life easier.’ So we kind of push it with that.”

The traditional counselling services are short term and reactive, so it’s important to frame the program in a more proactive way, says Karley Middleton, a wellness consultant at Hub International Strata Benefits Consulting in Winnipeg.

What’s available on the proactive side depends on the provider of the program, but it would typically include a website or other resources aimed at “maintaining issues that aren’t necessarily of a critical nature but more meant to keep you healthy . . . and help you keep your life on track so you may not need the reactive side,” says Middleton.

For example, if employees are looking for help with caring for a child, parent or even a pet, they can contact their employee assistance program to receive information about local options instead of spending hours searching online. “For some people, their pets might be the beings they come home to. If they’re going on holiday, it’s critical for them to find care the same way it would be critical for other people to find care for their children,” says King, noting the concierge-style services can also help people plan weddings or even find the perfect spot to propose to someone.

HumanaCare’s programs link to a number of third-party services, including second opinions for medical issues, disability matters, specialized case management and coaching related to chronic disease. “We offer those services in an integrated manner, so it’s one single point of contact,” says Marcellus. “[Employers] have integrated reporting and a much better understanding of what’s going on in their workplace because all of the services are coming under one umbrella.”

Programs have also evolved to be more inclusive of the whole family. While many employees may not realize that fact, they are often referred to as employee and family assistance programs. “It really is a broad application of services to your direct and extended family,” says Roger Cattell, regional vice-president of client development at Morneau Shepell. “People

forget they can help those around them by taking advantage of the supports offered through an EFAP.”

The services include support to find childcare services, as well as seek out legal and financial help when buying a first home. “EFAP has changed so much since its inception that employers recognize, as we blur the lines of when you’re working and when you’re not working, that we need to provide services to ensure employees and their families are able to manage all these things that are coming at them on a daily basis,” says Cattell.

Unfortunately, despite all that’s available to employees, there’s still a lack of knowledge “that it even exists, that it’s not just for the mentally ill,” says Shipley.

**How can employers help?**

To ensure employees get the most out of their program, it’s important for employers to understand what they’re offering. “I think it’s a matter of employers . . . going in and exploring it themselves and really becoming familiar with it so they can promote the whole program,” says Middleton.

Of course, any benefits program is valuable only if employees know about it and use it. Julie Holden, a senior vice-president at SEB Benefits & HR Consulting Inc., stresses the importance of ongoing communication, rather than just when employees join a company. “An employee will get the information about the vendor and the program and they’ll get the 1-800 number when they join the company or when it’s launched, but then two years later, when they go to access it, they forget,” she says, noting employers can direct staff to a dedicated website, put up posters, incorporate information into their wellness offerings, host learning sessions with their provider or do a relaunch to reinforce the program.

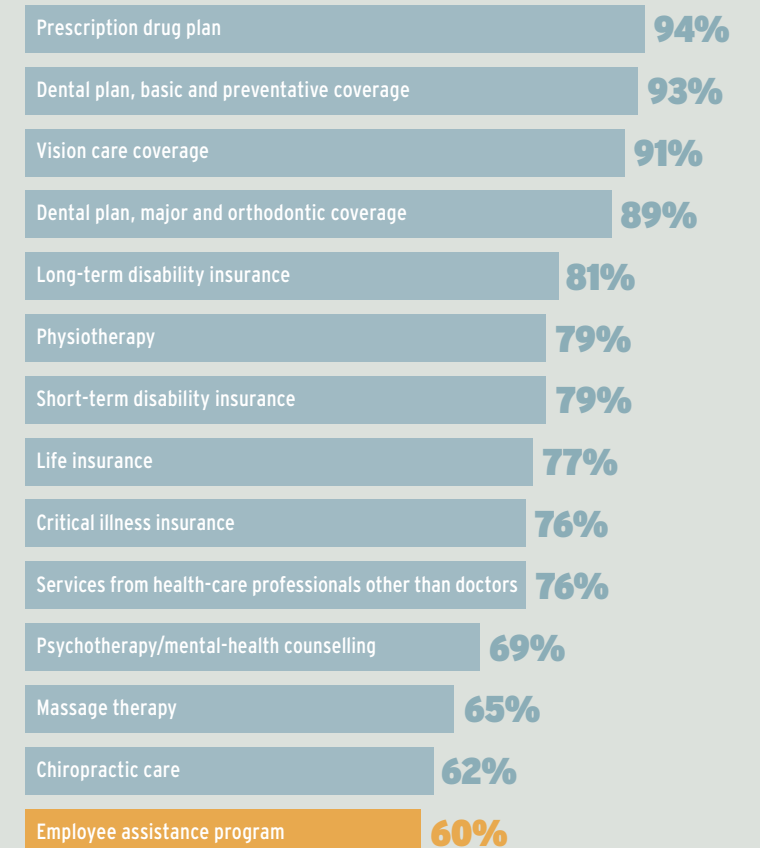
Transcom shares the details of its program during orientation for new employees, but the education doesn’t end there, says Robb. The company posts information outside the human resources department at its Barrie, Ont., headquarters, provides links on the company intranet site and trains all supervisors on the program. “They are very well versed and they have printed material they can hand out to employees who may need to use the EAP,” says Robb.

Indeed, ensuring employees get help from the program in the right way comes down to management, according to Cattell. “Organizations that involve the managers in the communication and make this part of the caring for people part of a manager’s role . . . is a critical component.”

Employers on the very leading edge are even

**HOW MUCH DO EMPLOYEES VALUE THEIR EAP IN COMPARISON TO OTHER BENEFITS?**

Percentage identifying a plan component as somewhat or very important:



Source: 2016 Sanofi Canada health-care survey

rebranding their programs, according to Shipley. “Let’s stop talking about EAP. Let’s identify this as an assistance or health and wellness resource and let’s brand it in such a way that employees are going to say, ‘I had no idea you could access that for a health risk assessment or a health coach.’ When we start to come at it from that angle, it opens up a ton of opportunities to impact real risks for organizations, not just from health and wellness, but it becomes a business conversation.”

**Jennifer Paterson is the managing editor of Benefits Canada: jennifer.paterson@tc.tc.**