

Right Direction

Employer Resource

De-stigmatizing Depression to Make It Easier to Call EAP

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Susan Marsico

Director of Corporate Benefits & HR Systems, OCLC



usan Marsico was surprised to learn that depression was a top benefit cost driver at her company.

Her company, the library information and technology services provider OCLC (the letters are the company name), had been promoting the value of its full-featured employee assistance program (EAP) for more than two years.

But there were the statistics: behavioral medications were among the most frequent prescriptions, depression was the fourth-ranked medical diagnosis, and it was a growing cause for short-term disability (STD) claims.

That was two years ago. "Since then, we've learned that this is common for employers," said Marsico, Director, Corporate Benefits & HR Systems for OCLC, the world's largest library cooperative, with 950 U.S. employees, headquartered in Dublin, Ohio.

OCLC continued with its EAP provider, because Marsico believed the problem was not with the EAP, but with the stigma associated with depression, which can create a barrier preventing individuals from seeking care. When OCLC chose mental health for its 2013 wellness program emphasis, the company wanted to reduce that stigma and help people feel more comfortable in calling their EAP provider.

As Marsico prepared for that campaign, she discovered Right Direction, a free website resource that could help her reach her goals. "I was understaffed at the time, so putting in any new program was daunting to me, but I looked at this and saw it was do-able," she said. "The materials and data on their website are very credible, and I thought it would resonate with our employees."

Right Direction is an initiative of the Partnership for Workplace Mental Health, a program of the American Psychiatric Foundation, and Employers Health Coalition, Inc.

A Safe Visit for Employees

An employee can visit www.rightdirectionforme.com, learn more about depression, and use the “Get Help” link to open a 10-question Depression Screening Tool. This is not an electronic form where personal answers are recorded, so it feels more private, and people may feel free to take more time to think over the questions and their implications. Right Direction is a safe first step to learn about depression, with no commitment to call the EAP or take any other action.

The site presents key facts in a simple and clear way, motivating people to take depression seriously, for others or for their own emotional well being:

- 1 in 10 adults will have a depression episode.
- Individuals with depression are twice as likely to develop coronary artery disease, twice as likely to have a stroke, and more than four times as likely to die within six months of having a heart attack.
- 80% to 90% of people with depression, even the most serious forms, can be helped.
- Depression can affect anyone, even a person who appears to live in relatively ideal circumstances.
- The site includes a chart based on research, “How depression looks to others,” to help people become aware that depression can affect co-workers. In the “How it looks to co-workers” column, depression may look like poor quality work, procrastination or indecisiveness, missed deadlines, being late to work, accidents on the job, and poor relationships with co-workers.

For the person who may be depressed, the website has simple messages: You’re not alone, and there’s help.

And you really should know about the bears that greet you on every page of the website. The site uses bears—creatures that hibernate for several months of the year—as an emotional icon to symbolize depression and its impact. This use of emotional icons may make it easier for visitors to explore their own feelings of depression.

Accessible Starting Point

“I loved Right Direction because it was very different... it had the bear logo,” said Bhawna Provenzano, PHR, Sr. Manager—Benefits, Wellness, and Engagement at Zappos Family of Companies. “We wanted to incorporate this with our EAP campaign. Our EAP didn’t have to do anything.”

For Zappos, an online apparel retailer, “Because we’re focused on delivering the best customer service, some of our people might be less likely to show that they are not happy,” said Provenzano. “So often there’s a stigma about calling EAP. Right Direction was a more creative way to approach depression, it was fun. It links out to other community resources, there’s a local support group for many different situations.” Among many links on the Resources page, a Depression Support Groups link takes visitors to a national directory of support groups offered by the Depression & Bipolar Support Alliance.

Using Right Direction did increase utilization of the EAP by Zappos employees slightly, said Provenzano. Their utilization was already above-average compared to their EAP’s book of business. “Right Direction focuses on depression in the workplace, it’s not going to be comprehensive enough for a work-site, that’s why we bundle it with EAP.”

A campaign must be an ongoing effort, Provenzano said. “No one cares about depression until it’s time when

the affected person needs to do something about it... it’s been important to keep it top of mind, not just once a year.”

Said Marsico, “We have reduced the stigma about using the EAP. When we rolled out this campaign, about 10 employees came to me and said, ‘I think it’s awesome we’re using this program. I’ve had depression, or I’ve had colleagues or family members who have had depression.’ I don’t know if we’ll ever get to the point where we can talk about depression the same way we talk about a strained back—but talking about it really helps.”

OCLC employees can get many services through their EAP. Marsico listed many needs that might come up for employees in which OCLC encourages EAP use: divorce, helping parents with an illness or living arrangements, struggling with a manager, selling a house, preparing and filing taxes. OCLC doesn’t have the latest figures on its EAP utilization, because these only come in annually, but OCLC’s EAP utilization is above average compared to its EAP’s book of business.

Although an employer can implement Right Direction with little or no effort by its EAP provider, it’s important to notify the EAP and health plans about the campaign, said Marsico.

Right Direction can provide a custom website landing page for an employer, placing the logo of that employer and its EAP provider on the top of the Right Direction home page, and a link to the employer’s EAP provider in a prominent place lower on the page. For an example, visit www.rightdirectionforme.com/ksu.

“With the custom URL we can track how many clicks come to the Right Direction site through that link,” said Marcas Miles, Sr. Director Marketing & Communications of Employers Health Coalition. Tracking applies only to the landing page, said Miles; once visitors click to any other

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Right Direction page, tracking ends. For more information about landing pages, including fees for this service, contact Miles at mmiles@ehpc.com.

Tools for Employers

The website's "For Employers" link has a library with materials for many of the key points in an onsite awareness and education campaign:

- How-to instructions for the campaign manager including Planning & Evaluation, and a sample matrix for campaign rollout;
- Posters with excellent graphics, and simple messages, and the bear wearing items to relate to men and women in many work environments;
- Slide deck presentations to sell the initiative to senior leadership, and help middle managers embrace the initiative;

- Three educational articles for the company intranet;

"All the material can be customized, we can put our wellness program logo and our EAP logo with all the contact information," said Marsico. She wanted to avoid using materials provided by their health plan, because it would have had the wrong logos, since they are using an independent EAP, not the one provided by their health plan.

More than a Website

Both OCLC and Zappos have had multiple visits from Right Directions representatives who manned an exhibit booth at company health and wellness events. Provenzano located the Right Direction booth adjacent to the EAP booth, making it easier for people to immediately follow up if they were motivated to seek help.

Marsico said employee spouses also attend their wellness events, creating opportunities for personal chats to promote Right Direction and EAP. She discovered that often employees don't take brochures or wallet cards home, so spouse visits can increase the program's reach.

Onsite visits have been well-received by employees. At the first visit, said Provenzano, "I didn't think people would be excited about depression, we said turnout would be slow. I was amazed at how many people showed up, more than 200 people visited the booth."

Miles added, "Zappos and OCLC have been early adopters and we've been happy to attend their health/benefit fairs to help with visibility of their Right Direction efforts. We have a great table top booth display and bring along some cool handouts, like stress ball bears. We're interested in supporting employers' efforts and providing examples of what other employers have done, or are doing, and provide guidance in developing

rollout strategy, and addressing other needs. We could entertain requests for visits, but currently we don't have any hard and fast rules in place."

Conclusion

Right Direction can be a useful program to help break down the stigma associated with depression and mental health issues. Anecdotal information and general program trends suggest Right Direction can help drive employee utilization of EAP, although this may be difficult to verify depending on how EAP numbers are reported. The website is an engaging, easy-to-navigate source of information about depression, giving employees a private and non-threatening experience. The website also provides an excellent materials library for employers to use in rolling out a Right Direction campaign. Right Direction representatives may be able to advise on program rollout strategies, or to participate in health and wellness fairs under favorable circumstances. To learn more, visit www.rightdirectionforme.com/index.html. ●

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