



the cost of *happiness*

GUEST COLUMN FROM THE  
OVMA WELLBEING COMMITTEE

## Boosting staff wellbeing affordable with EAP

It's no secret: Veterinary professionals' wellbeing is at a higher risk than the general population. And yet, despite widespread concern, many professionals do not receive the care that they need. Barriers to obtaining help are many and complex, but usually boil down to a few core issues. Cost concerns, uncertainty about how and when to obtain help, and the perceived stigma around mental illness often hinder veterinary staff from seeking the care they need. Additionally, much of the discussion has centered on veterinarians, without as much attention to support staff. Employee assistance programs (EAPs) are an excellent way to tackle these problems.

In short, an EAP is a benefit employers can offer their staff that gives them access to wellness services tackling a wide spectrum of personal and work-related problems. The full range of benefits varies depending on the employer and the program, but common offerings include:

- short-term counseling
- legal help
- financial guidance
- child and elder care
- stress management
- leadership coaching
- help with marriage and family problems
- conflict resolution
- emotional intelligence and resiliency training
- bullying support
- referrals to community resources for long-term care

"My partners and I were eager to provide our team with more mental health support as we've become better educated about the challenges facing our industry on that front," said Ben Spinks, an Ohio hospital administrator who recently added an EAP to his employees' benefits. "Our

EAP helps ensure team members have a safety net if they're struggling with mental health issues and other common stressors.”

Unfortunately, EAPs are uncommon in the veterinary field and offered at only 17 percent of practices—as compared to 77 percent of all employers nationwide. But when you dig into the details, it's easy to see why bringing these to the veterinary field makes sense and can actually overcome some of the major barriers to care.

### BARRIER 1: COST

Contrary to the popular belief that all health and wellness services are expensive, EAPs are generally affordable. They can range in cost from \$10 to \$100 dollars per employee, per year, with a nationwide

average of \$35. The cost ultimately depends on whether the employer pays per use or has a fixed-rate plan. The latter option generally includes a set number of consultations, after which employees are referred to a qualified local provider in your health plan's network. (As a bonus, full services are often available to partners and qualified dependents.)

Furthermore, happier employees are better employees. Studies have shown they are more productive and create better work environments. Most employers who offer an EAP report a significant return on their investment—on average, returns are three times higher than the investment! This comes in the form of lower healthcare costs, decreased absenteeism and increased retention, as well as other intangible

benefits like increased engagement and reduced burnout.

### BARRIER 2: UNCERTAINTY ABOUT SERVICES

Employees are often unclear or even unaware of the spectrum of services and when they can be used. Because of this, there is an assumption that EAPs are only for the most dire of situations—which means some individuals wait until their situation deteriorates or even avoid using the benefits altogether. Worse yet, some employers don't make their staff aware of these services until there is a crisis.

In truth, EAPs frequently include not only wellness services, but coaching, leadership development, financial management, child and elder care, and other ancillary services. Employees need not be in a life-or-death situation to take advantage of them.

### BARRIER 3: THE STIGMA

Some people worry that they will be judged if others find out about their struggles. As such, the primary reason employees do not use EAPs is that they fear their anonymity will be breached—and put their reputation, job, or even license at risk.

However, all discussions between an individual and an EAP service provider are privileged and HIPPA protected. If a practitioner worries their counselor will report their substance abuse or addition to the licensing board,

there is a solution: The Ohio Physicians Health Program. According to their website ([www.ophp.org](http://www.ophp.org)), “Under Ohio Revised Code Section 4741.221, the Ohio Veterinary Medical Licensing Board honors treatment in lieu of disciplinary action for any professional licensed under their Board so long as they are referred to OPHP.”

Furthermore, employees do not have to fear others seeing them access wellness services at work or at an on-site meeting with a

## By the Numbers

**17% vs. 77%**  
percentage of veterinary practices nationwide that use EAPs versus employers in all sectors

**\$35**  
average annual per-employee cost of an EAP

**\$3**  
average return on investment for every dollar spent on an EAP

PLEASE SEE **HEALTH** ON PAGE 15.

counselor. Access to services is available to master's- and doctorate-level professionals 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and 365 days a year through a private phone call or visit to a website.

## IMPLEMENTING AN EAP

A successful EAP rollout should include ample, ongoing discussion with staff members. Incorporate the following into your implementation strategy, as well as future communications:

- Be proactive about making employees aware of the privacy policies and confidentiality.
- Include EAP language in the employee handbook and at annual benefits reviews.
- Regularly remind employees of the EAP and how to use it at staff meetings.
- Present EAP information to all new hires.

- Ask managers to mention the EAP directly to employees they feel would benefit.
- Give concrete examples of its uses—especially if practice owners or management have used the services—to drive engagement and encourage usage.

Large institutions (such as OSU), the state and federal government, and corporate practices (like Banfield and VCA), currently provide EAPs. If your company does not yet have an EAP, check with your benefits broker about what options are available. Often, EAPs are already included in disability insurance plans, but standalone options through CorpCare, CompEAP and AAHA exist as well. Additionally, members of large purchasing groups (e.g., VMG) may have preferred provider agreements that further enhance the affordability for private practices.

*OVMA Wellbeing Committee member Dr. Kenneth Brunson of Tipp City Veterinary Hospital contributed this article.*

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