

Bridging the Gap: The Role of Digital Solutions in Mental Health Care

by **Michael Held** | *LifeSpeak Inc.*

Mental health is no longer a hidden issue—It's a daily headline, a constant in our conversations. Yet, despite this growing awareness, the gap between talking about mental health and truly addressing it remains staggering. Access to effective care, education and support is often lacking, leaving individuals, families, workplaces and entire communities to bear the heavy, unseen cost.

Mental health exists on a continuum. On one end is well-being, a sense of capability and ease of connection with others. On the other end, serious mental illnesses can impair the ability to work, maintain relationships and manage daily life. Most people experience a range of mental health states throughout their lives, falling somewhere along this spectrum. But as more employees turn to their employers for mental health and well-being support, organizations face the task of addressing this broad and ever-evolving spectrum of needs.

This poses a challenge, to be sure, but one that employers should consider addressing, considering that U.S. employers lose \$550 billion annually due to employee mental health conditions, including burnout, anxiety and depression.¹ Likewise, workers calling in sick for mental health issues cost Canadian companies an estimated \$16.6 billion annually in lost productivity.²

Meanwhile, 59% of employees and 71% of executives in the U.S. said they would seriously consider quitting their jobs for one that would better support their mental health,³ and 68% of employees say improving their well-being is more important than advancing their careers.⁴

Employees now expect access to benefit plans that support their physical health, mental health and overall well-being. Employers agree. According to a 2023 Mercer survey, 94% of large companies (500 or more employees) in the U.S. increased support and strengthened coverage for mental health care in the last few years.⁵ Of these, 72% added virtual behavioral care networks or telehealth options; 68% bolstered support with employee assistance programs (EAPs), classes or digital health solutions that support mental health; and 28% expanded coverage under their existing health plans. Also, employers reported adding workforce training

AT A GLANCE

- Employers have been increasing support and strengthening coverage for mental health care in recent years. Digital mental health support programs are an emerging option for employers that want to fill any gaps in mental health care.
- These programs often provide on-demand, virtual content and services dedicated to issues such as substance use, mental health and resilience, nutrition, wellness and mindfulness. They supplement traditional mental health benefits and can tailor strategies for individual organizations.
- Factors to consider when choosing a virtual mental health program include content, technology and usability as well as vendor support and qualifications. Employers may improve engagement with these programs by offering consistent communication and nurturing a supportive workforce culture.

to support mental health needs and promote mental wellness at work.

Beyond Health Plans and EAPs: Support for Whole-Person Well-Being

Mental health care and medical care are intrinsically linked, with one often influencing the other. For example, people with a chronic disease are at higher risk of developing depression, perhaps triggered by anxiety or stress related to the disease; brain changes from the disease, such as in the case of a stroke; or because of medication prescribed to treat the chronic condition, such as with autoimmune diseases like rheumatoid arthritis.

Similarly, depression can lead to a higher risk for chronic diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes and Alzheimer's disease.⁶ This could be attributed to the fact that those with depression may struggle with daily activities, including exercise and eating well, or they may experience changes in the way the body functions, due to increased inflammation, reduced blood circulation and abnormalities in stress hormones.

The close link between physical and mental health raises the question of why workplace support for each has historically been so different. This distinction is evident in the separate development of employer-sponsored medical plans in the U.S. and EAPs, both of which emerged during and shortly after the Great Depression.

EAPs are among the most common benefits offered to support mental health, with more than 2.6 million public and private employers offering ac-

cess to more than 72 million U.S. workers.⁷ EAPs were initially introduced to deal with occupational alcoholism when drinking on the job was the norm and employers began to notice the adverse effects of alcohol on workplace performance and productivity.⁸

Coverage for mental health care was, in most cases, excluded from employer health plans in the U.S. until the Mental Health Parity Act (MHPA) of 1996. That legislation has since been amended to ensure that individuals in group health plans or those with individual health insurance coverage who seek treatment for covered mental health conditions or substance use disorders do not face greater burdens on access to benefits for those conditions than they would face for the treatment of medical conditions.

While progress toward equity continues to evolve, employers may still struggle to meet the spectrum of employee needs related to mental health care. Optimal support likely requires the seamless integration and promotion of diverse resources, including health plans, EAPs, educational and preventive programs, and supportive and psychologically safe work environments.

Making Progress With Virtual Mental Health Solutions

The system has seen definite improvements. Health plan coverage has made mental health care more affordable by reducing out-of-pocket costs and helping employees meet deductibles. Meanwhile, improved parity has expanded coverage, and the number of

available treatment programs continues to increase. However, access to care remains a challenge, with 65% of employers in the Mercer survey citing it as a concern. Insurance plans may feature significant gaps in provider networks because of a shortage of qualified mental health professionals. Health plans may also require prior authorization or a mental health diagnosis before covering therapy, or they may limit the type or number of sessions covered. They may also set unfavorable reimbursement rates, which can lead practitioners to exit the network, further limiting the availability of therapists.

Over the years, EAPs have evolved to fill an array of needs around mental health, and they are valuable for providing support in times of crisis, offering employees help when urgent situations arise. Significantly, the 9/11 tragedy and COVID-19 pandemic pushed the demand for EAPs to help employees cope with these events as well as other national and global incidents and natural disasters. However, depending on the EAP, limitations may include outdated technology, provider quality, wait times, and content that is too general or fails to focus on day-to-day coping skills. EAP utilization also remains stubbornly low: According to a 2023 study from the Employee Assistance Professional Association (EAPA), only 6-10% of employees actively use their EAP services annually.⁹

Telehealth offers yet another emerging and seemingly successful route to greater and more diverse access to mental health care. It's been well-received among employees and particularly

popular during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Allowing employees to attend therapy and psychiatric appointments virtually is convenient, flexible and geographically accessible, and it helps reduce the stigma attached to mental health care by offering anonymity and privacy. However, there can be limitations, such as potential technical issues; prescribing, licensing and reimbursement challenges; or a preference by or need for patients and providers to meet face to face.¹⁰

Creating a Comprehensive Workplace Mental Health Program

Evaluating the pros and cons of various services can leave any human resources (HR) team overwhelmed and aware that no single solution spans the breadth of employee mental health needs. While health plan parity requirements close some of the financial and accessibility gaps in mental health care and treatment, traditional EAPs provide a crisis safety net, and telehealth offers the potential to expand provider access; each of these solutions often focuses primarily on those with diagnosed or acute needs. This may leave HR leaders looking to fill a need for supplemental services that provide proactive education, prevention and day-to-day management practices to alleviate stressors before they become debilitating.

Companies may consider exploring programs that provide on-demand, virtual content and services dedicated to issues such as substance use, mental health and resilience, nutrition, wellness and mindfulness. These programs supplement traditional mental health benefits and can be tailored to the needs of individual organizations. For example, some companies set annual wellness goals and implement a series of employee challenges, activities and learning opportunities to support those goals that can be bolstered by these programs. A quarterly or monthly wellness campaign may focus on topics such as mental health, mindfulness or substance use using content provided by a virtual mental health program.

Some virtual wellness programs also offer evidence-based support from professionals to help individuals explore challenges in greater depth, offering features such as internet-based cognitive behavioral therapy (iCBT), substance use coaching, expert advising and ask-the-expert web chats. These virtual resources serve as proactive tools, helping to

provide people with preventive care before a crisis arises. The virtual nature of these services also helps eliminate previous barriers to entry, such as geographic limitations, scheduling conflicts or the stigma often associated with seeking in-person support.

Factors to Consider When Selecting Virtual Mental Health Support

Virtual options for mental health support proliferated during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. HR professionals tasked with choosing benefits for their organizations may need some guidance on how to select the solution that best fits their needs. The following criteria can help employers select the solution that is a good match for the organization and the workforce:

Technology and Usability

- **Integration with the existing employee benefits platform:** A service that uses a cloud-based SaaS delivery method can be attractive because it may more easily allow for expansion and provide 24/7 accessibility, cost efficiency, a high level of security and integration with existing systems like employee intranets or EAP portals.
- **Usability:** Is the platform user-friendly? Is navigation easy and intuitive? Is the language inclusive? Is the content always free and accessible?
- **Privacy and security:** Ask whether the platform complies with key security and privacy standards. Standards to consider include the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) in the U.S. and the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act in Canada. Others include the General Data Protection Regulation (European Union law); SSAE 18 SOC 2, for verifying security controls; and WCAG 2.0, which looks at accessibility.¹¹

Vendor Support and Qualifications

- **Usage and outcomes:** Ask for utilization and outcome reports to ensure that the team will receive the right quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate the impact on the health of the population and the organization's bottom line.

- **Vendor experience and longevity:** A longer track record can indicate stability, expertise and a proven ability to adapt to changing needs. Look for a partner that has demonstrated its ability to respond to the changing population needs with relevant content and engagement formats.
- **Communication support:** Will the solution work within the company's culture and support its goals? Does it dovetail with and add value to corporate wellness initiatives? For example, if your organization is focused on preventing or mitigating musculoskeletal claims, does the partner provide resources that teach employees about strengthening their bodies to avoid injury or how to use movement during active recovery?

Content and Integration

- **Scope and type of content:** Does the content come in a variety of formats, such as webinars, videos, assessments, articles and other resources? Is it current and reflective of the latest mental health research and trends?
- **Program integration:** Can the program integrate seamlessly with other resources, such as EAPs, health plans, telehealth offerings, or on-site classes and training?
- **Content quality:** Is the content evidence based and clinically valid? Look for content that is originally produced and reviewed by diverse and recognized experts and includes information and education on a spectrum of mental health and resilience topics. Consider whether it reflects a whole-person approach to mental health while being easy to digest, actionable and engaging.
- **Inclusivity:** Is the solution global? Does it accommodate all employees and their families? Is the content and support available in different languages?

Tips for Improving Employee Engagement With Virtual Programs

As with all benefits, one of the challenges of launching a new program—perhaps especially when it's related to mental health—is gaining employee acceptance and building and sustaining engagement. Visibility, focused communication, and fostering an open and inclusive culture may assist with

these efforts. Employers may want to focus on the following strategies.

Normalize Conversations About Mental Health in the Workplace

Employees who feel stressed or burned out can also feel isolated and alone. Organizations that openly address mental health challenges and the fact that life isn't always easy can give employees the encouragement they need to ask for help and to seek solutions when they feel they are struggling. Training leaders and front-line managers on how to spot mental health symptoms and how to address them respectfully and with supportive resources is a critical way that employers can demonstrate care for and a commitment to employee well-being. A manager or director who can point employees to specific content or resources will demonstrate a level of empathy and understanding that brings corporate culture alive.

Communicate Consistently About Available Offerings

HR leaders are never short of topics about which they need to educate employees. Mental health support, however, requires ongoing communication and education. Across an organization, different teams face different stressors at different times—not to mention the perpetual stress some employees go through when they face personal or family challenges related to substance use, caregiving, or distressing local and world events. Companies can consider creating a calendar of relevant programming and themed marketing campaigns that the team can use to build sustained awareness and engagement. When mental health resources are front and center, employees know how and where to seek support throughout the year.

Nurture a Supportive Culture

The right virtual mental health content can integrate seamlessly into an organization's benefits structure and corporate culture to enhance a company's personality and reputation. Over time, this supportive culture can contribute to empathetic leadership that drives increased productivity, reduced stress and stronger teams. Employers can emphasize prevention and proactively educate employees

Reprinted from the First Quarter 2025 issue of *BENEFITS QUARTERLY*, published by the International Society of Certified Employee Benefit Specialists. With the exception of official Society announcements, the opinions given in articles are those of the authors. The International Society of Certified Employee Benefit Specialists disclaims responsibility for views expressed and statements made in articles published. No further transmission or electronic distribution of this material is permitted without permission. Subscription information can be found at iscebs.org.

©2025 International Society of Certified Employee Benefit Specialists

and their families with workplace training—in person, via video or online—on topics such as mindfulness and prompt conversations about mental health conditions and those who live with them. Creating a supportive culture also means listening to employees and offering content that meets their changing needs and aligns with organizational health objectives and strategy.

Understand Diverse Employee Needs

Meeting employees where they are in their lives is essential. Life stages and individual circumstances vary significantly, so recognizing and accommodating these differences—as well as preferences for how and when to access information—becomes a valuable part of a company's engagement efforts. Promoting resources for substance use may resonate with one demographic, while resources for caregivers will be meaningful to another. Manager training can be especially useful to help them better guide their teams to relevant content.

Conclusion


Employer-sponsored access to virtual care can be a sound solution for supporting employees on their mental health journeys and an effective supplement to traditional health plan benefits for mental health care. For example, where EAPs serve a valuable function in crisis scenarios, virtual mental health services may add value as a preventive and proactive resource. Because these resources can be accessed by individual employees and their dependents or by a conference room or Zoom meeting full of employees, they can support mental well-being at an organizational and individual level.

According to research from Deloitte, organizations that support employee mental health not only help their employees, they also achieve a significant return on their investment.¹² Companies achieved greater returns by implementing a proactive approach that catered to employees along the continuum of mental health needs.

AUTHOR



Michael Held is the founder and chief executive officer of LifeSpeak Inc., a provider of mental, physical and family well-being solutions for employers, health plans and other organizations. Find him on LinkedIn at www.linkedin.com/in/michael-held-987293a3.

Establishing and refining a benefits and well-being program that delivers continuous education, resources and access to experts that help individuals better understand and manage their mental health on a daily basis may help organizations maintain a thriving workforce and healthy bottom line. This proactive approach can help employees build resilience and maintain their well-being, reducing the likelihood of crises. Such services can complement the support of EAPs and help organizations ensure that employees receive comprehensive care that addresses both urgent needs and long-term well-being. 

Endnotes

1. www.modernhealth.com/post/cost-of-poor-mental-health-in-workplace.
2. www.mercer.com/en-ca/insights/total-rewards/employee-wellbeing/how-much-are-you-losing-to-absenteeism.
3. www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/talent/workplace-well-being-research-2024.html.
4. www.selectsoftwarereviews.com/blog/employee-wellness-statistics.
5. www.mercer.com/en-us/insights/us-health-news/employers-support-growing-demand-for-mental-health-services.
6. www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/chronic-illness-mental-health#.
7. [https://archive.hshsl.umaryland.edu/bitstream/handle/10713/20645/ATTRIDGE%20\(2023\)%20EAP%20Commentary%20US%20-%20revisedAugust10_final_IJSRP.pdf](https://archive.hshsl.umaryland.edu/bitstream/handle/10713/20645/ATTRIDGE%20(2023)%20EAP%20Commentary%20US%20-%20revisedAugust10_final_IJSRP.pdf).
8. www.nivati.com/blog/what-is-an-eap.
9. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10102824>.
10. [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/articles/PMC7577680](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7577680).
11. Statement on Standards for Attestation Engagements (SSAE) 18 Systems and Organizations Controls (SOC) 2 and Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0.
12. www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/ca/Documents/about-deloitte/ca-en-about-blueprint-for-workplace-mental-health-final-aoda.pdf.