



OMNI INSTITUTE REPORT

Executive Summary

Impact of Employee Assistance Services on Workplace Outcomes:

A Colorado State Employee Assistance Program Study

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Colorado State Employee Assistance Program (CSEAP) partnered with OMNI Institute to examine the effectiveness of providing EAP services in improving workplace productivity outcomes in 2013. The findings from that study were published and cited widely by the field, emphasizing the benefits of EAP services to employee mental health (Richmond, et al., 2016¹; Richmond, et al., 2017²) and job performance in terms of reduced absenteeism (Nunes, et al., 2018³). In the ten years since the original study, and since the COVID-19 pandemic specifically, there has been greater attention to employee mental health, overall well-being, and changes in behavioral health service delivery, generally.

In 2023, CSEAP partnered again with OMNI to replicate and expand upon the original study as an opportunity to understand how individuals are using EAP services in the current workplace environment which has been influenced heavily by the attention on employees' mental health since the pandemic. This is a critical time to revisit questions that were addressed by previous research to explore changes that may have occurred, investigate any new questions that provide insight into the challenges facing employees today and their access to the EAP, and understand the implications for the EAP in a modern and flexible workplace environment.

A few of the key findings from the 2013 study are highlighted below:



EAP services significantly reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety.



Employees who received EAP services experienced a steeper decline in sick leave usage as compared to the propensity score matched control group that did not receive EAP services, with estimates of 4.8 to 6.5% fewer hours lost per month to illness.



Findings indicated employees who sought and received EAP services had significantly greater reductions in absenteeism and presenteeism than employees experiencing similar mental health/behavioral health situations. A reduction in absenteeism was particularly true for those who began with lower severity of depression and anxiety at baseline. Findings suggested that EAPs contribute to improved productivity and reduced absenteeism by addressing and improving mental health symptoms.

Current Study

The current study uses the same design as was used in the 2013 study to compare clinical outcomes of employees receiving EAP counseling services to a well-matched group of employees who have not sought CSEAP services. Control participants are matched to intervention participants (e.g., CSEAP clients) who are similar on the psychosocial distress measures of depression, anxiety, alcohol use, and workplace problems that often lead workers to seek services from employee assistance programs.

¹ Richmond, M. K., Pampel, F. C., Wood, R. C., & Nunes, A.P. (2016). The impact of employee assistance services on workplace outcomes: Results of a prospective, quasi-experimental study. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*. DOI: 10.1037/ocp0000018

² Richmond, M.K., Pampel, F.C., Wood, R.C., & Nunes, A.P. (2017). Impact of employee assistance services on depression, anxiety, and risky alcohol use. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*. DOI:10.1097/JOM.0000000000000744

³ Nunes, A.P., Richmond, M.K., Pampel, F.C., Wood, R.C. (2018). The effect of employee assistance services on reductions in employee absenteeism. *Journal of Business and Psychology*. 33(6), 699-709. DOI: 10.1007/s10869-017-9518-5

Methods

This study uses a quasi-experimental design and propensity score matching to identify a group of Colorado state employees who are similar in relevant respects (e.g., absenteeism, depression, anxiety) to Colorado state employees who have sought services from CSEAP.

Participant recruitment occurred over a 6-month period (July 2023 through December 2023). Employees seeking counseling services from CSEAP were invited to participate at the time of requesting services. These participants make up the intervention group. Baseline data were collected online from these participants using similar questionnaires and assessments typically administered by CSEAP at program enrollment. Recruitment for the control group was conducted via emails sent to all employees in participating state departments. All employees of the participating state agencies⁴ received monthly emails inviting any interested individuals to participate in this study. Those employees who completed the baseline survey online and confirmed they had not received/requested EAP services in the past 6 months prior to the study were included in the propensity score matching analysis to identify the control group.⁵

Those in the matched sample were contacted in April 2024 (4 to 9 months after baseline) and asked to complete a follow-up survey that included the same baseline assessments with the exception of demographic information. Out of the 590 individuals contacted, 363 completed the follow-up survey. The propensity score matching process was conducted a second time to ensure strong matches for those that had both baseline and follow-up survey data. A matched sample of 141 participants from each group was identified as the final sample (282) for analysis.

Research Questions and Results

Overall, data from 141 well-matched pairs of participants from each of the study groups (control and intervention) were used to answer the research questions. We found that EAP services had a positive impact on certain outcomes, but these outcomes differed from the ones positively impacted in the previous study.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1:

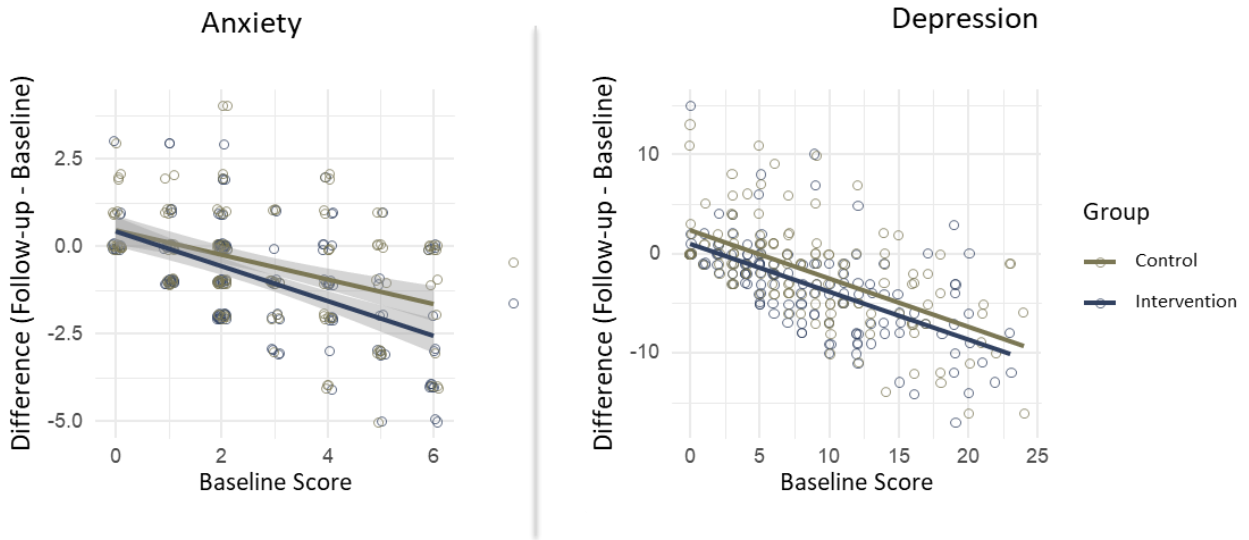


Do employees who receive EAP counseling services show significantly greater reductions in symptoms of anxiety and depression than a matched group of employees with similar work-related/personal issues who do not receive EAP services?

The Intervention group experienced, on average, a greater reduction in anxiety and depression than the control group. Employees receiving EAP counseling services show significantly greater reductions in anxiety and depression than their matched counterparts who did not receive EAP services. This reduction is evident in the figure below, which shows that for any baseline score the intervention group had a greater reduction on both mental health outcomes.

⁴ A list of Departments that participated in the study can be found in Appendix A of the full report.

⁵ Participants in the intervention group were confirmed as having received services from CSEAP and control group members were verified as not having received services from CSEAP between completion of the baseline and follow-up measures.



RESEARCH QUESTION 2:



Do employees who receive EAP counseling services show significantly greater improvements in presenteeism (ability to concentrate at work) at follow-up than a matched group of employees with similar work-related/personal issues who do not receive EAP services?

RESEARCH QUESTION 3:



Do employees who receive EAP counseling services have fewer missed work hours at follow-up than a matched group of employees with similar work-related/personal issues who do not receive EAP services?

RESEARCH QUESTION 4:



Do employees who receive EAP counseling services show significantly greater improvements in workplace distress at follow-up than a matched group of employees with similar work-related/personal issues who do not receive EAP services?

Across absenteeism, presenteeism, and workplace distress, no detectable difference was observed between being in the intervention group compared to the control group. Average scores on these outcomes were lower at follow-up than at baseline for both the Intervention and Control groups indicating that improvements were seen on all three measures from baseline to follow-up regardless of EAP participation.

RESEARCH QUESTION 5:



What are the differences in the workplace environment and characteristics of the sample between the 2013 and 2023 studies?

Several changes have occurred in both the workplace environment and in the characteristics of the employees who participated in each study.

Mental Health: Data in the current study demonstrate higher levels of anxiety and depression for participants in the intervention and control groups in 2023 as compared to the 2013 study.

Seeking Professional Help: Participants in the current study were much more likely to have sought professional help outside of the EAP. The percentage of individuals in the control group who obtained professional help for any personal concerns that were causing them problems increased in 2023 (38.3%) as compared to 2013 (22.3%). This increase in seeking professional help was found in both the matched sample as well as the larger employee population that participated in the baseline survey suggesting the pattern is a reflection of the Colorado state employee population generally. Across all respondents, 25.4% (n=3078) had sought professional help in 2023 compared to the 2013 respondent group, where 12.5% (n=2052) had sought professional help. In other words, in the current study, 38% of respondents in the control group were receiving professional support outside of an EAP.

EAP Usage: The average number of sessions for participants in the current study (2.77 sessions) was similar to the 2013 study (2.79 sessions). In both studies, about 55% of participants completed three or fewer sessions. However, with just a few sessions (about 3), 51% of respondents in 2023 reported that their situation improved as a result of receiving CSEAP services.

Workplace Environment and Time Tracking Changes: The manner in which employers are supporting and advocating for their employees' mental health has changed in the past decade. Since 2021 Colorado has employed a universal Flexible Work Arrangements (FWA) policy⁶ that state departments can implement in addition to using remote work opportunities to maximize efficiencies. These policies, in conjunction with offering EAP services, support Colorado's overall goals to "positively impact retention efforts, work-life balance, workloads, staff commitment, efficiency productivity, and overall work culture" for its employees. The policy allows employees to work with their employer to adjust work location or schedule to flexibly manage unexpected events or illness.

Technology: The adoption of virtual technologies provides more options for individuals to connect to their EAP from different locations. Virtual visits are increasingly common and allow employees the opportunity to receive EAP services more efficiently. Most sessions were conducted as virtual (video) visits (79%), 16% in person, and the remainder over the phone.

Discussion & Conclusions

The current study provides an understanding of the broad level of impact that EAP has on employees. Specifically, the findings indicate that anxiety and depression scores decreased significantly more for employees who received EAP services than for those who did not. The work environment and how people balance work and their personal lives have changed drastically over the past 10 years. The pivot to more flexible work schedules and remote work has significantly changed how employees in Colorado work. Further, the stigma of mental health concerns has decreased as a function of changing attitudes toward mental health generally and potentially resulted in greater numbers of individuals seeking mental health support from providers in the community and EAPs.

Concerns about mental health have generally increased, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, and this study provides additional evidence of this trend by demonstrating higher levels of anxiety and depression for participants in the intervention and control groups in 2023 as compared to the 2013 study.

Not only are individuals in the workforce demonstrating higher levels of anxiety and depression than 10 years ago, the manner in which employers are supporting and advocating for their employees' mental health has changed. The FWA policy allows employees the flexibility for self-care or appointments while still being able to meet the demands of their jobs by working alternate hours as necessary to accommodate their personal needs.

⁶ [Universal Policy Flexible Work Arrangements - Published 2021-06-11 Revised 2023.03.02.pdf - Google Drive](#)

These workplace changes that include shifts in how employees think about their working hours may have affected the ability of the absenteeism and presenteeism scales to accurately capture variations in employee productivity. Employees who need to attend a session with an EAP or a behavioral health provider in the community likely do not record that as work hours missed (absenteeism) since they can make up those work hours at a later time. Further, with the opportunity to flex hours, employees having trouble concentrating on work (presenteeism), may feel empowered to take time to address their concerns in ways that allow them to make up those hours with greater focus on work. As noted previously, CSEAP services are more accessible than ever, and attending a session may not take time away from work at all.

Opportunities for CSEAP & EAPs Generally

CSEAP has been providing EAP services to State employees for nearly 40 years. A greater awareness and acceptance of the need to support the mental health of employees has resulted in continued high demand for CSEAP services. Employees continue to reach out to CSEAP for support and doing so can lead to reductions in anxiety and depression. A less anxious and depressed workforce is clearly desirable for employees and employers alike.

The environment in which employees work has changed since the original study was conducted in 2013. With its adoption of universal flexible work policies and integration of remote work opportunities, the State of Colorado has provided employees the opportunity to care for personal concerns thus supporting worker productivity. Further, the reduction in anxiety and depression experienced by EAP participants seem to demonstrate the stated goals of the state including improved work-life balance, staff commitment, and overall work culture.

The results of this study strongly suggest the need to explore how best to determine productivity in the current work environment which has become increasingly more flexible, mobile, and remote. Future research should examine what metrics are most appropriate to measure workplace outcomes and employee productivity in the current era of flexible and remote work environments.

While EAP participation in the 2023 study did not appear to impact the three measurements of productivity (absenteeism, presenteeism, and workplace distress), the impact that the EAP has on reducing anxiety and depression confirm that EAP services continue to have an important and meaningful impact on Colorado employees today.