



## **Addressing the Emotional Aftershocks of COVID**

### **Innovative EAP Solutions for Post-Pandemic Mental Health**

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*It's no secret that the impact of COVID is likely to linger for months, if not years. Even as the U.S. reluctantly takes its finger off the Pause button, employees are grappling with the pandemic's mental health aftershocks. The recent surge in virus variants has only worsened the situation.*

According to the National Behavioral Consortium (NBC), the leading professional trade association of top-tier Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), employee requests for mental health support have increased significantly since the advent of COVID, with calls related to anxiety spiking at 70% for one EAP firm. Employee concerns included stress, depression due to social isolation, health fears and even everyday challenges such as finding day care.

Throughout the pandemic, NBC's EAPs were able to meet much of this demand through long-standing clinician networks, online counseling and other mental health services. However, they also developed visionary solutions to address three growing employee needs fueled by the COVID chaos.

#### **Need #1: Therapy on Demand**

Whether due to the increased use of streaming services, the prevalence of smartphones, or months spent in semi-isolation, employees became accustomed to getting what they wanted when they wanted it. Including counseling. That could mean texting with a therapist during lunch, scheduling a virtual one-on-one for the weekend, or tapping through a self-assessment screen at 3 AM.

What's more, as social distancing rules now slowly loosen, employees are seeking greater flexibility with the scheduling of both online and *in-person* counseling. "My Way" is the new employee mantra and no single mental health approach or access avenue is sufficient. Instead, top-tier EAPs are offering *multiple* therapeutic pathways and platforms to promote employee engagement and satisfaction.



For example, Carebridge Corporation (Malvern, PA) complemented its onsite and virtual counseling services with a 24/7 chatbot that combines Artificial Intelligence with real-time Cognitive Behavioral Therapies. New Directions Behavioral Health of Overland Park, KS and IBH of Irvine, CA also enhanced their digital platforms with self-directed CBT, while Concern EAP in Mountainview, CA enriched its self-serve platform with programs such as evidence-based mindfulness training.

On-demand support was also made available for the stresses of everyday life. The self-service LifeReady™ platform developed by KGA of Southboro, MA, helped employees address the emotional challenges of personal milestones such as having a baby or buying a new home, both of which were particularly taxing during the pandemic.

## Need #2 – Peer-to-Peer Guidance

COVID significantly impacted employees' ability to interact with their peers. WebEx, Zoom and Microsoft Teams covered some of the gaps, but co-worker connections such as corridor conversations and lunch chats vanished. In addition, peer-to-peer guidance outside of work, such as group therapy sessions, dramatically diminished.



Yet the desire to benefit from the knowledge, experience and emotional support of peers never lessened. In fact, COVID turned up the dial, especially for healthcare staff, educators and other essential workers.

The in-house EAP at Boston-based Massachusetts General Hospital met this need by augmenting its traditional counseling with a Peer Support Program for COVID struggles and solutions. The program was so successful it will soon become permanent. Vital WorkLife of Minneapolis, MN, offered similar support for educators. Hard-hit teachers received help through confidential telephone sessions with PhD- and master's-level counselors who brought real-world classroom experience to the calls.

Other EAPs broadened their peer programs. First Sun of Columbia, SC introduced an on-demand peer recovery program for those dealing with substance abuse issues and VetAdvisor (Falls Church, VA) expanded its support of veterans to help additional trauma-exposed populations, including EMTs, police officers, firefighters and others who were front and center during the pandemic.

## Need #3 – Greater Self-Improvement

Living in quarantine “bubbles” forced many people to look inward. For some, that led to a greater appreciation of their blessings. However, COVID’s forced introspection also shone a spotlight on personal goals yet to be realized. The desire for self-improvement had the time to become a quest. As a result, employees accelerated their search for personal growth.

To that end, Mines & Associates of Littleton, CO added new confidential, personalized coaching sessions to help employees become the best version of themselves. Sleep, nutrition, stress, weight, smoking, professional development and even athletic performance were – and still are – aspects of the program.



Creating the life you love was also the principle behind National EAP’s COVID Support and Education videos, which gained over 10,000 views on the company’s YouTube channel. In fact, it’s the title of one of the Hauppauge, NY-firm’s live webinars, which ran daily and monthly throughout 2020. Webinars were also key for Perspectives, LTD of Chicago, IL, which developed 20 free client webinars on topics that included *The Effects of Racism on Mental Health*, *The COVID-*

*19’s Women’s Recession* and *Return to Work Issues after the Pandemic*.

Even *physical* self-improvement was in demand. Just ask any stiff-backed employee who turned a dining room chair or bed into a work seat. Recognizing the direct connection between physical and mental health, Austin, Texas-based Alliance Work Partners joined forces with a physical therapy company to help employees address posture challenges and other musculoskeletal concerns.

## A Need Unlikely to Fade

These are just some of the EAP advancements that rapidly emerged to meet the COVID-driven demands of employees nationwide. Many of these innovations – including the QR code therapy appointment system developed by Personal Assistance Services of St. Louis, MO and the *Staying in Touch* webinar series for Medicare clients launched by UPMC Life Solutions out of Pittsburgh, PA – have already become permanent EAP offerings.

As the aftershocks of COVID continue to shake today’s work world and new variants threaten to create additional tremors, the role of effective employee mental health services cannot be overstated. Consequently, top-tier EAPs throughout the US are remaining vigilant, exploring ingenious new solutions that will help tomorrow’s employees remain on solid emotional ground.

### ***About the National Behavioral Consortium (NBC)***

*The National Behavioral Consortium (NBC) is an invitation-only professional trade association of thought leaders from top-tier Employee Assistance (EAP) companies, Managed Behavioral Health (MBH) organizations, and affiliated partners. NBC’s visionary members share ideas, experiences and best practices to ensure the highest quality support for employees facing emotional and everyday challenges.*