

## **Corporate Wellness, Employee Assistance Programs and Stress Management**

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Corporate wellness continues to gain the attention of employers around the country, and indeed the world. In economically challenging times, companies are spending millions to save even more. Essentially, corporate wellness programs are built around a traditional preventive medicine model using health risk assessments to identify areas of potential danger for employees, (e.g. obesity, hypertension, high cholesterol, etc.), and recommend action steps to remediate the identified problem areas. In addition, exercise, proper diet, smoking cessation and other constructive behaviors are also encouraged. Employee assistance programs (EAPs) are a valued ally to the wellness process, assisting managers in identifying at risk workers, and employees in identifying resources appropriate to their concerns.

Wellness programs and EAPs are tasked with providing education regarding stress management. As important as this is, research has shown that didactic education alone does not necessarily lead to behavior change. This is not good news for companies striving to improve the health of their workforce, while driving health care costs down. Financially, the impact of stress in the workplace – be it a small family business or large corporation - is staggering. Consider the following:

Stress accounts for

- 7.6% (\$104B) of total direct US healthcare costs (\$1.4T; 2001)
- 217 million work days lost costing \$17B each year
- Indirect costs commonly exceeding direct costs (estimates exceed \$105B 1990 dollars; behavioral health issues among workers ages 15-44 represent the 5<sup>th</sup> leading cause of short-term disability & the 3<sup>rd</sup> leading cause of long-term disability)

But there is some good news. Research clearly demonstrates that treatment works. Similarly, organizations can respond and significantly increase productivity & employee satisfaction while reducing health care costs.

EAPs can encourage both individual clients and their client companies to adopt strategies for managing health risk and cost. The formula is simple:

Stress management = health risk & cost reduction. Where to begin this effort?

A stress test is a fundamental element of an effective stress management program. A good stress test provides a clear indication of the individual or organizational stress level and is an excellent way to benchmark where the person and/or the company stand. The ideal stress test allows workers to determine their stress levels for their personal, social and work lives. This can be done on an individual basis, in the EA professional's office.

If there is a desire for an organizational intervention, combining individual results across a group or an entire enterprise can assist in assessing the aggregate stress levels across that group or enterprise – the first step in determining the risk and cost of stress in the workplace. Combined with other data, companies can instantly see where to target efforts to improve the health and financial performance of the organization.

As an example, The Oxygen Plan was developed to assist individuals and organizations to better manage stress - the #1 modifiable health risk factor in the United States - and the health costs that go with it. The Oxygen Plan features a new capability thanks to its innovative health metric, the Stress Number(TM). By using this metric, individuals and organizations can accurately measure, aggregate and track stress levels in an unprecedented way. EA professionals are able to help their client's identify their Stress Number(TM) by taking the free stress test at <https://my.oxygenplan.com/stress-test>. The test consists of 30 questions and the results provide a client Stress Level Breakdown. The client gains awareness of the source and level of their stress and in turn, the EA professional can provide more targeted and appropriate intervention. If a broader interface is desired, The Oxygen Plan program can easily and effectively integrate with an EAP on an organizational level.

#### Sources of Information

1999 Surgeon General's report on Mental Health

2003 Presidents New Freedom Report on Mental Health

2005 National Business Group on Health report on Behavioral Health Workplace Strategies

2005 Institute of Medicine report on Improvement of Quality of Mental Health Care

Scientific publications (references available)

Dr. Donald E. Williams and Eric Lucas are Chief Science Officer and Founder of The Oxygen Plan Corporation. The Oxygen Plan provides innovative tools that help organizations reduce the costly and

negative effects of stress in the workplace and at home, including increased healthcare expenses, chronic medical conditions, mental health issues, absenteeism and productivity losses, and reduced employee engagement. The company's patent-pending stress management program, including Stress Number(TM), teaches individuals to recognize the sources and symptoms of stress and provides them with tools and information for effectively reducing and avoiding stress. For more information, visit <http://www.theoxygenplan.com>.