



This section is set up to provide a ready-made Brown Bag Session for you to use with employees and/or managers. Use as is, or adapt this information for a general employee group. You may reproduce as many copies as needed.

Online Mental Health Services That are Legitimate

We use the Internet to look up almost everything these days, and health information is no different. The problem with the Internet, though, is that anyone can post anything they like. This means that the posting about depression you just read might be by someone who isn't qualified to talk about depression at all.

If you've been looking online or in the media for information to help yourself or a loved one, you may be frustrated by some of the conflicting information you've found. You know you can rely on your local EAP provider for information you can trust, but what about when you go online? Other than your EAP, how do you know what additional online information is trustworthy?

Health Fact Sheet

The following are highlights of typical online health care users, as reported by Pew Internet Project research:

- ❖ 72% of Internet users say they looked online for health information within the past year. This is based on a September 2012 survey, the first time Pew asked people to think about their online health activities in the past 12 months.

- ❖ 31% of cell phone owners, and 52% of smartphone owners, have used their phone to look up health or medical information. This finding is of particular interest to those interested in trends related to young people, Latinos, and African-Americans, since these groups are significantly more likely than other groups to have mobile Internet access. **This trend also illustrates the importance of the EAP being aware of useful, reputable behavioral health apps they can pass along to their clients, such as those presented in this month's cover story in *Employee Assistance Report*.**

- ❖ 19% of smartphone owners have downloaded an app specifically to track or manage health.

- ❖ 77% of online health seekers say they began their last session at a search engine such as Google, Bing, or Yahoo.

- ❖ Another 13% say they began at a site that specializes in health information, like WebMD.

- ❖ Just 2% say they started their research at a more general site like Wikipedia and an additional 1% say they started at a social network site like Facebook.

- ❖ The most commonly-researched topics are specific diseases or conditions; treatments or procedures; and doctors or other health professionals.

- ❖ In fact, 35% of U.S. adults say that at one time or another they have gone online specifically to try to figure out what medical condition they or someone else might have.

- ❖ Half of online health information research is on behalf of someone else – in other words, information access by proxy.

- ❖ **Only one in five Internet users check out the online reviews and rankings of health care providers and treatments.**

- ❖ **Just 3-4% of Internet users have posted their experiences with health care service providers or treatments.**

- ❖ **Many people, however, DO track their individual health online.** For instance, 60% of U.S. adults say they track their weight, diet, or exercise routine.

- ❖ 33% of adults track health indicators or symptoms, like blood pressure, blood sugar, headaches, or sleep patterns.

- ❖ 12% of adults track a health indicator on behalf of someone they care for.
- ❖ Added together, seven in ten adults say they track at least one health indicator.
- ❖ Finally, 26% of online health seekers say they have been asked to pay for access to something they wanted to see online (just 2% say they did so).

The Pew web page, <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/health-fact-sheet/> is updated whenever new information is available.

Evaluating Online Health Information

While the majority (72%) of Internet users have looked online for health information within the past year, distrust in the Internet as a source of health information still remains common, especially among older adults.

According to JMIR Publications, websites should clearly identify the source and credibility of information. Look for websites with articles that are either written, and/or reviewed by qualified health care professionals such as medical doctors. (*Examples of credible websites are listed in the Handout section on page 4.*)

The British Columbia Division of the Canadian Mental Health Association offers these guidelines for evaluating mental health and substance use information online:

- ❖ *Where did the information come from?* Is it based on research published in a journal, the writer's own research, an interview or a press release? If it's on a website, does the writer list their credentials?
- ❖ *What website is it on?* As stated, websites that belong to governments, government-funded agencies, well-known health providers, universities or groups of medical professionals are generally the most reliable.
- ❖ *Does the website offer reviews and rankings*

of health care service providers and treatments? Legitimate sites aren't afraid to include reviews of articles and information from qualified professionals, as well as statements from users (e.g. testimonials) who have found their services useful.

- ❖ *Why are they providing the information?* Are they trying to sell you something? Does the source have anything to gain from a media story?

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- ❖ *Can you tell the difference between advertisements and information?* Web advertisements are common, but a credible website will clearly show ads differently than information. Less credible websites may not, so advertisements may look like part of the information.

- ❖ *Does the story seem balanced?* Does the story make it seem like a problem hurts (or helps) more people than it really does, or does it make something sound scarier than it really is? A balanced story generally gives real numbers. (*More on that in the next section.*)

- ❖ *Does the story claim to know everything,* or does it mention that we don't know everything about all the issues?

- ❖ *How new is the information?* Look for a date. If it's more than a couple of years old, it may be outdated.

- ❖ *Do they offer overly simple solutions for complicated problems?* This is a huge warning sign.



An example of this is claiming that vitamin D “cures” all types of depression.

❖ *Does the story respect everyone?* Does it encourage you to think, ask questions and make your own decisions?

Beware of Misleading Numbers!

Numbers, such as the number of people affected by a disorder or the number of people who experience side effects of a particular medication, can help you understand more about the story and about the risks and benefits. But some people use numbers and statistics to overemphasize information, underemphasize information, or just plain confuse you!

According to Dr. Kimberly Thompson with the Harvard School of Public Health, keep in mind that:

❖ 10% is the same as 1 in 10, 10 in 100, or 100,000 in 1 million. A credible source will tell you what guidelines they used — for example, whether it’s 10% of people in a study of 1,000 people or 10% of people in a study of 10 people.

❖ The reverse is also true: if 1% of people are affected, it also means that 99% of people aren’t affected.

❖ When it comes to health, everyone has different risk factors because everyone’s body and lifestyle is different. Some people may be more likely to experience a particular health problem than others. Numbers and statistics can give you a general idea of how big or small the problem is, but they can’t tell you how the problem will affect you personally.

Personal Experiences CAN be Useful, but...

Many people living with mental disorders or substance use problems share their stories online through websites, blogs, web forums or other social media. These stories can help inspire hope and connect you to others going through similar experiences. They are an incredibly powerful tool to help you feel less alone and see how others navigated the system and what their recovery journey was like.

However, when you read these stories, it’s important to remember that it’s *one* person’s experience — not something that everyone went through. For example, a blogger may write that a particular treatment didn’t work for them, but that doesn’t mean the same treatment won’t work for others.

Watch Out for Conflicting Information

There is also conflicting information available on the Internet. One website might say one thing about a substance use treatment and the next site you look at might say the opposite. When you or someone you love is living with a mental disorder or substance use problem, the last thing you want to do is sort through bad information or worry that the information you do get is wrong.

News Stories Don’t Tell the Whole Story

News media can help you understand complicated issues. But information around mental health or substance use that’s *too* simple can also be misleading. The problem is that a brief news story often can’t explain the full story when it comes to mental disorders, substance use problems or recovery options.

Space or airtime in the news is limited and expensive, and major news stories are not always balanced. So a story may be entertaining, but it may not apply to all people in all cases. Major news stories may lead you to believe that harmful things are happening to a lot of people, when in reality they might be very rare.

In addition, if new research finds a link between depression and bone loss, it’s not unusual to see a headline that says, “*Depression causes bone loss*,” even though that may not actually describe the link. Headline writers aren’t as cautious as researchers when they state conclusions.

Summary

The way we are bombarded with information today, it’s no surprise that evaluating health-related websites can prove difficult. The good news, as reported by Pew, is that the majority of Internet users are looking online for health information. In fact, many are even tracking their own health online.

On the flip side, as also noted by Pew, only a *minority* of users are *sharing* their experiences with health care providers or *checking out* online reviews and rankings of various health providers.

This means that many employees are vulnerable to misinformation when it comes to their health. Fortunately, through trainings like these, the EAP is in a position to help. ■

Examples of Credible Websites include:

CAPHIS – Consumer and Patient Health Information Section
<http://caphis.mlanet.org/consumer>

The site's "*Health Websites You Can Trust*" is its contribution to the Medical Library Association so that the headquarters staff can refer individuals to a list of quality health websites.

CDC Men's Health
<http://www.cdc.gov/men/>

From the Centers for Disease Control, a website dedicated to men's health issues. This site offers a broad range of information aimed at both consumers and health professionals. There are links to hundreds of articles on topics ranging from alcohol to obesity to reproductive health and workplace safety. Healthy living tips, leading causes of death and health statistics are included. Articles written for easy reading are identified.

DailyMed – Current Medical Information
<http://dailymed.nlm.nih.gov/dailymed/drugInfo.cfm?id=2115>

DailyMed provides reliable information about marketed drugs. It offers FDA-approved labels (package inserts) as well as the chemical formulas, composition, and physical description of the drug.

Food and Drug Administration (FDA)
<http://www.fda.gov>

The FDA oversees the regulation of pharmaceutical and food products as well as medical devices. The site has both professional and consumer information on topics such as specific drugs, taking medications safely, buying generic drugs, and saving money on prescriptions. It also includes a guide to buying drugs safely online, information about recalls and product safety, and post-market drug safety information.

HealthyWomen
<http://www.healthywomen.org/>

HealthyWomen (formerly the National Women's Health Resource Center) is a nonprofit, national clearinghouse for women's health information. It develops original health materials and content for women and provides links to related news. Features: Ask the Expert column, womenTALK blogs, discussion groups, free newsletters, videos and podcasts, Facebook, Twitter, and apps.

MedlinePlus – Health Information from the National Library of Medicine
<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/>

Health information from the National Library of Medicine. Easy access to **Medline** and Health topics, medical dictionaries, directories and publications.

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) Mental Health Topics
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/index.shtml>

This site provides information about the causes, signs and symptoms, treatment and resources available for mental illnesses. Booklets, easy-to-read brochures, and fact sheets are provided in English and Spanish. The latest news on mental illness, help in locating services, a link to clinical trials and pre-formatted Medline searches for the latest information add to the usefulness of this site.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
<http://www.samhsa.gov/>

SAMHSA's mission is to reduce the impact of substance abuse and mental illness on America's communities. This website provides information about substance abuse and mental health prevention, treatment, recovery, and several treatment finding tools. ■