The COVID-19 pandemic has elevated the issue of mental health in the workplace and has accelerated the need to understand the factors associated with the Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) utilization in order to more effectively meet the increasing mental health needs of employees.

The purpose of this study was to examine EAP utilization as a result of the pandemic. Specifically, it looked at whether the EAP utilization has increased in a post-pandemic environment, whether demographic factors age, gender, or race/ethnicity influence EAP utilization, and how employers promote EAP benefits to support employee mental health needs during the pandemic.

Employee utilization of EAPs has been historically low, even though most employers provide the benefit. A study by Compton and McManus (2015) of 44 organizations providing EAP services found that approximately 47% of employers reported employee utilization rates between 2.1% and 8%. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the increase in stress, anxiety and depression drives higher rates of outcome measures such as absenteeism, presenteeism, work distress and unsatisfaction. Numerous studies found that EAPs can make improvements in these outcome measures and improve work performance.

This study conducted a review of national and regional survey data to compare the utilization of EAP benefits pre- and post-pandemic. It has the following findings: (1) the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant negative impact on employee mental health and well-being; (2) the EAP utilization results were mixed, but higher levels of utilization were found for stress and anxiety issues; (3) women, particularly those who are white or Hispanic, are more likely to utilize EAP services than men; and (4) there was minimal difference in how EAPs services have been implemented by employers post-pandemic compared to the pre-pandemic activities, except for the additional promotional communication.

In this paper, we found mixed results for EAP utilization after the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to improve utilization of EAP services, we argue that employers must take proactive steps to develop strategies to address employee mental health needs, including educating employees and managers about the value of managing stress, anxiety and depression; reducing the stigma associated with seeking help; and improving choice and access to services. Specifically, bringing the importance of mental health to the forefront helps to destigmatize the issue. The increased use of telemedicine and mobile applications can improve the accessibility of mental health services. Moreover, additional efforts should be taken to obtain detailed demographic data to ensure race/ethnicity is tracked. This information will assist employers and providers in developing strategies to address the needs of underserved employees.