

The employees trust our EAP, so if we have an incident at work, such as a sexual harassment complaint, isn't the EAP the best choice for doing the investigation so everyone knows it is fair?

I am a long-time friend with my employee who is a participant in the employee assistance program. Can I ask her to sign a release so the EAP can give me more information about the nature of her problems and how they are being treated?

I have a depressed employee who functions satisfactorily at work, but I wonder if (s)he would perform even better if their depression was treated.

No, your employee assistance program would not be assigned responsibility for conducting an investigation of a sexual harassment complaint. This is a formal function and the legal obligation of management. There are numerous steps and communication points involved in such an investigation. The documentation is relied upon later to make administrative, legal, and disciplinary decisions. An EAP has a specific purpose within an organization and playing an investigatory role is not compatible with this purpose. The EAP is a source of confidential, reliable, and safe help and such an activity would result in a loss of such a perception and likely reduce utilization.

You can ask but the EAP will recommend against it. Establishing a separate information flow to you creates a relationship that is fraught with risk and assorted problems. The EA professional will offer quality guidance on your role in managing performance so your employee has the best chance of returning to the level of performance you require. Your employee is free to share information, of course, but when supervisors try to manage performance and also process personal problems, employees typically diminish their involvement in treatment recommendations due to role conflict. The employee perceives you as a trusted, safe, and understanding friend, and will relate to you on this basis rather than as the employer's representative, which is your job. Undermining this employer-employee dynamic removes a constructive force and sense of urgency that troubled employees rely upon to become motivated and stay focused on treatment.

A depressed employee may function at work adequately, but if treated (s)he would likely experience an increase in their social and occupational functioning. Some employees may suspect they have untreated depression, and some may not identify it at all because they have slowly adapted to its symptoms over an extended period. Depressed employees may appear slow to respond, lacking in energy, or resist engaging with others. Suggest self-referral to the EAP for obvious symptoms only (e.g., "you look really tired"). Or you may consider a formal EAP referral if work tasks cannot be accomplished satisfactorily. Be careful not to label them as lazy, quiet, unassuming, or "eccentric." When this happens, others adapt, reduce confrontation, work around the employee, and allow the condition to linger, with unforeseeable consequences.