'Til Stress Do Us Part: An EAP's Perspective on Marital/Relationship Issues

Insights from the Shepell·fgi Research Group

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Healthy home relationships are critical for employee well-being and performance and for organizational performance in general. However, some employee groups may experience relationship problems more often than others. With this mind, the Shepell·fgi Research Group analyzed four years of EAP data to identify employee segments that are at elevated risks of experiencing relationship problems.

Key findings:
- Marital/relationship discord accounted for 19% of all issues presented to EAP - 25% when compared to other life stressors, alone.
- Separation and divorce issues accounted for an additional 4% of all presenting issues.
- Age and gender were found to be the most important demographic drivers of marital/relationship issues.
- More people in their thirties (23%) reported marital/relationship issues than people in other age groups.
- More men (23%) than women (18%) reported marital/relationship issues.
- More supervisors and managers (21%) reported marital/relationship issues than other employees (19%).
- Non-full-time employees are almost twice as likely than full-time employees to access EAP for domestic violence issues.

At-risk groups:
- Men under 40 years of age, with five or more years of service, but not working full-time were more likely to report combined relationship problems (37% vs. 24% of average employees).
- Women supervisors/managers, between 30 and 49 years of age, who were working full-time, with fewer years of service were also more likely to report combined relationship problems (31% vs. 24% of average employees).

At-risk industries and regions:
- There were differences among industries in terms of employee reports of marital/relationship issues (i.e., more for labour and not-for profit, less for communications).
- More people from the West (BC to Manitoba, 27%) than Quebec (18%) reported marital/relationship issues to EAP.

Interpretations and recommendations are tabled to help employers and EAPs develop intervention and prevention strategies to target employee segments that are at risk for relationship problems.

Introduction

Close, personal relationships are vital for psychological well-being. They have the single greatest impact on our development, well-being, and overall meaning of life. Close ties to other people, including social support groups, also make us less vulnerable to physical health problems and premature death. Healthy relationships not only make us feel good - they lead to healthier and longer lives.

It has long been known that occupational stress can affect the quality of non-work relationships. Consider the following:

- Forty-four percent of Canadians report negative work-to-family spillover in terms of time spent with their partners.

- Forty-one percent of Canadians report negative work-to-family spillover in terms of the quality of relationships with their partners.

• High work stress has been linked to marital conflict, family stress, and poor performance in both work and family roles.

• Individuals who have high job satisfaction are more emotionally and interpersonally available to their family.

The costs of unhealthy relationships are not trivial. Studies indicate that employers could reduce absenteeism by 6.5% and save $1 billion per year in direct costs if they eliminated high levels of work-to-family interference. Employees with high work-to-family interference are also 6.7 times more likely to say they would leave their jobs to have more time for themselves and their families.

It is clear that employers must take appropriate actions to enhance the personal relationships of their employees. But first, employers must understand which employees are more likely to experience relationship problems. Employee groups that are at risk must be identified to inform prevention efforts. With this mind, the Shepell·fgi Research Group conducted a study to examine the frequency of relationship problems as EAP presenting issues, and isolate demographic factors that may identify EAP clients at-risk for such problems.

Method
The sample consisted of 156,724 individual clients that accessed the Shepell·fgi EAP between the years 2003 and 2006 (62% female, 38% male). Analyses were restricted to active client organizations that joined the EAP before 2003 to control for changes in population size and composition.

Shepell·fgi tracks nearly 100 different presenting problems at EAP intake. Three problems, marital/relationship discord, separation and divorce, and domestic violence are classed as relationship problems. These were examined separately. At times, marital/relationship discord and separation and divorce were collapsed into 'combined relationship problems' and compared to all other problems as a composite. We then compared the rates of relationship problems for specific demographic groups

against rates for the total sample. The demographic variables were age, gender, job level, years of service, employment status, industry, and province. Self-reported stress at EAP intake was also examined.

The data was analyzed using Pearson chi-square analysis, Classification and Regression Tress (CRT) and Chi-Squared Automatic Interaction Detection (CHAID). The following discussion is intended to be high-level and relatively jargon-free.

GENERAL FINDINGS

Marital/relationship discord accounted for 19% of all issues presented to EAP - 25% when compared to other life stressors, alone. Separation and divorce issues accounted for an additional 4% of all presenting issues. Domestic violence issues account for 0.4% of all EAP presenting issues.
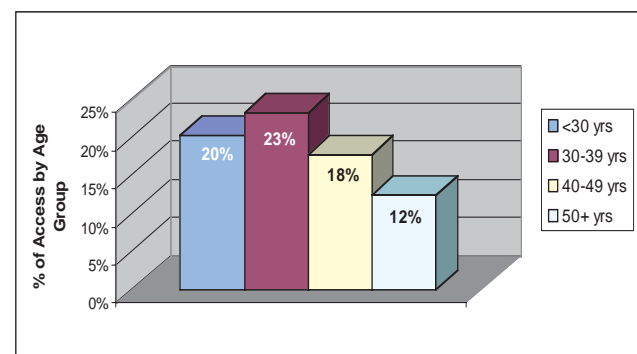
WHO IS HAVING RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS?
Demographic Differences in Relationship Problems

AGE:
Overall, there is a clear age effect, with younger Canadians experiencing more relationship problems.

Figure 1. Age & Marital/Relationship Discord

When clients in their thirties accessed EAP, 23% of them reported marital/relationship discord (compared to 20% for clients under 30 years of age, 18% for clients in their forties, and 12% for 50 years plus). This group, in addition to clients in their forties, were

also more likely to report separation and divorce issues (5% of accesses vs. 3% for other age groups).

What could account for this age effect? It is possible that clients under 30 years of age are less likely to be in serious, committed relationships. Additionally, clients who are 50 years of age or older are likely in relationships that have stabilized over the years. Separation and divorce occur earlier rather than later in most marriages. With respect to clients in their thirties, their greater prevalence of relationship problems may be a function of children and work. More Canadians are delaying reproduction until their thirties. This, combined with increasing responsibility in the workplace, may be placing undue stress on people in this age group.

There were slight age differences in reports of domestic violence, with the three youngest groups reporting more of this problem (0.4% of all problems) than clients 50 years of age or older (0.2%). Nonetheless, these small differences suggest that domestic violence is a relevant problem for all employee age groups. Employers and EAPs should take this into consideration with respect to prevention and intervention (i.e., recognizing the signs, implementing policies).

GENDER:
There was a gender difference in reports of relationship problems, but not in the expected direction. Although women accounted for the majority of EAP accesses for marital/relationship discord (i.e., 56%), they also accounted for the majority of EAP

Figure 2. Gender & Marital/Relationship Discord

accesses in general (i.e., 62%). This gender disparity in EAP use was controlled to enable a more clear examination of gender and relationship problems.[1] In fact, men were more likely than women to access EAP for marital/relationship discord (23% of men vs. 18% of women). This finding is supported by past research. For example, 83% of men in one study indicated that their personal relationships are marred by work-related stress. Employers may have to alter their assumptions about gender and relationships if they expect to support male employees in ways that promote healthy relationships at home.
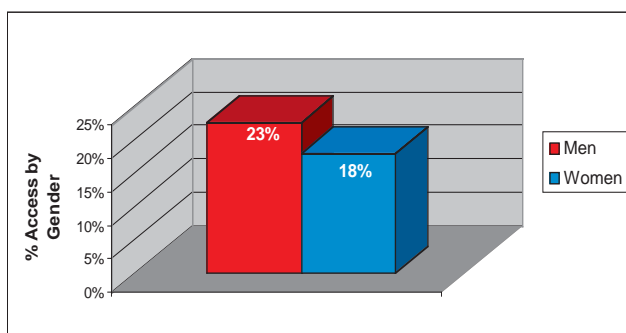
Despite these findings, it is well-documented that women have less power in marital relationships to bring about more equitable distributions of child care and household responsibilities. Women also experience less spousal support for their careers than their male counterparts. These circumstances may lead to increased role overload, job stress, and depression for women. It may be that women experience an equal number of relationship problems, but access EAP more to address resulting emotional problems.

There was no observed gender difference in reports of separation and divorce problems (4% of all accesses for both genders). However, as would be expected, five times as many women accessed EAP for domestic violence issue (0.1% vs. 0.5% of accesses for men and women, respectively).
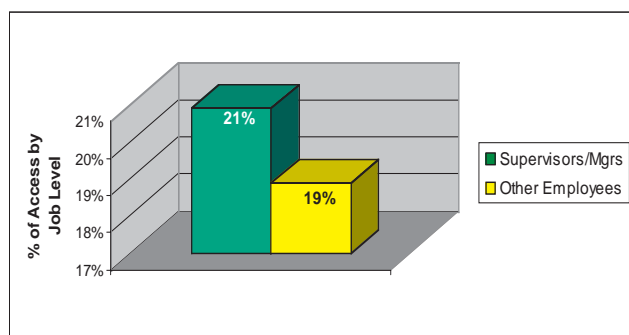
JOB LEVEL:
Supervisors and managers were found to access EAP at a higher rate than other employees for marital/relationship discord (21% vs. 19% for other employees). Supervisors and managers tend to work longer hours, take home more unpaid work than other workers, and report higher levels of stress than other workers. This leaves less time for a quality home life. On the contrary, when employees have low role overload, they are more likely to report high family and parental satisfaction, and greater family adaptation. Additionally, marital satisfaction has been found to increase as spouses engage in less 'obsessive working'. Supervisors and managers also manage people.

1. These kinds of controls are in place throughout the report.

Figure 3. Job Level & Marital/Relationship Discord

Constant social contact (especially dealing with poor performance) can lead to burnout. The social 'reservoir' may be dry for some supervisors and managers by the time they arrive home to more personal relationships. Given their sphere of influence and higher salaries, it is important to create supports to ensure that supervisors and managers are functioning well both at work and at home.
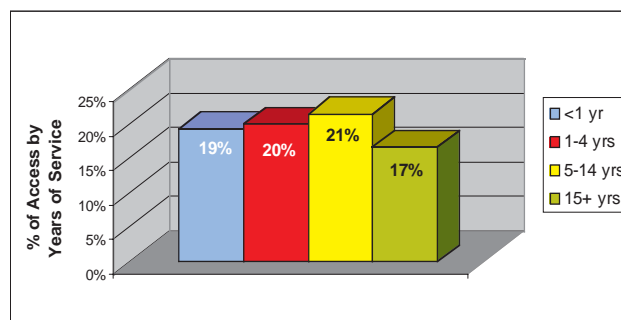
EMPLOYMENT STATUS:
Few differences existed between full-time and non-full time employees in their accesses for marital/relationship discord (19% of accesses for both groups) and separation and divorce (4% vs. 5% of accesses, respectively). However, non-full-time employees accessed EAP for domestic violence issues at nearly twice the rate of full-time employees (0.7% vs. 0.4% of accesses, respectively). While some part-time employees are part of dual-income families, others may be relying on part-time earnings as a single source of household income. Lower job security and socioeconomic status may complicate personal relationships for some part-time employees. A difference of 0.3% may not seem substantive, but if our EAP sample was representative of the Canadian population, this would translate to almost 6,000 additional part-time employees seeking EAP for domestic violence problems. If employers are not able to provide some employees with full-time work, they may need to find more innovative ways of supporting their employees to ensure a more stable home life.

YEARS OF SERVICE:
Reports of relationship problems differed depending on their years of service with their employers. Employees with five to 14 years of service had the

Figure 4. Years of Service & Marital/Relationship Discord

highest rate of marital/relationship discord (21% of accesses) compared to 17% for employees with 15 or more years of service. It may be that years of service is a proxy for other variables that have impacts on relationship health such as age (maturity, stable relationships), and income.

EMPLOYEE SEGMENTS & RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS: A CLOSER LOOK

So far, the link between demographics and relationship problems appears to be small. What is needed is a finer-grained analysis of how several demographic variables combine to impact relationship health. Individuals are complex. It isn't enough to know that women are reporting fewer relationship problems. It is more important to understand the circumstances under which they *are* reporting relationship problems (i.e., at younger ages, as supervisors/managers). Knowing this helps employers and EAPs to identify *employee segments* that are at risk for relationship problems and craft prevention programs to target these segments.

Through the use of CRT and CHAID methods of analysis, the Shepell·fgi Research Group was able to isolate complex employee segments that are at risk for relationship problems. These analyses also enabled us to rank the top demographic 'drivers' that differentiate these segments on the basis of EAP accesses for relationship problems.

For these analyses, marital/relationship discord and separation and divorce were collapsed into a

composite of 'relationship problems'.[2] Twenty-four percent (24%) of all EAP accesses were associated with this composite. The following is a capsule review of the findings.

What Employees Are at Greatest Risk for a Relationship Problem?

The following employee segments report a **higher** rate of relationship problems relative to the total sample (i.e., greater than 24% of accesses):

• **Men, under 30 years of age, with five or more years of service** (31% of their accesses).

• **Men, under 40 years of age, with five or more years of service, but not working full-time** (37% of their accesses). Some younger men in both of these groups may not see themselves as progressing rapidly enough in their careers, either by moving 'up' in their current organization or with new employers. This could lead to self-esteem problems and distress, which could further impact their relationships at home.

• **Women, 30 to 49 years of age, are supervisors or managers, with less than five years of service, and working full-time** (31% of their accesses). Women are still the primary caregivers at home. A full-time supervisory job can lead to emotional exhaustion and leave less energy for social roles at home. Interestingly, when similar women have 1) less than one year of service, or 2) more than five years of service, they report fewer relationship problems. The former group may still be in the 'honeymoon period' as supervisors/managers with their new employers. The latter group may be fully acclimatized to their roles and organizations and have wide access to organizational supports. This signals to employers that they may need to create additional supports for female employees who are embarking on supervisory careers.

In general, the above findings suggest that employers may need to provide employees with more realistic job previews and better orientation practices. While 15 years is a long time to benefit from acclimatization, perhaps employers can identify the protective factors associated with extended tenure and find ways to instill these earlier in job tenures.

What Employees Are at Least Risk for a Relationship Problem?

The following employee segments report a **lower** rate of relationship problems relative to the total sample (i.e., lower than 24% of accesses):

• **Women, 50 years of age or older, who are working full-time** (13% of their accesses).

• **Men, 50 years of age or older, who are working full-time** (19% of their accesses).

Both age and career maturity are protective factors against well-being problems in general. With respect to women, current research indicates that well-being is highest for women when they have multiple life roles, including a full-time career. Even similarly-aged women who are working non-full-time jobs report a lower proportion of relationship problems (18% of all accesses for this group).

As an aside, when separation and divorce issues are examined separately, reports of this problem were similar to the total sample for a variety of complex employee segments (based on age, gender, years of service, etc.). The learning here is that separation and divorce issues appear to affect everyone equally. Any supports that employers and EAPs enact to address these issues should take this into consideration.

What are the Most Important Drivers of Relationship Problems?

The above analyses enabled us to rank demographic variables in terms of their relative importance as drivers of relationship versus other problems. The following variables are ranked in order of 'standardized importance' (i.e., based on 100%):[3]

1. Age (100%)
2. Gender (32%)
3. Years of Service (7%)

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2. Domestic violence was excluded from this composite for theoretical and methodological reasons.

3. Our analysis focused only on demographic variables that are tracked by the Shepell·fgi EAP.

Which Industries Report the Most Relationship Problems?

How do different industries compare in terms of reports of relationship problems? Since Shepell·fgi tracks EAP accesses for over 40 industries, Chi-Squared Automatic Interaction Detection (CHAID) was used to classify industries into a smaller number of segments on the basis of similar reports of relationship problems. Again, 24% of all EAP accesses for the total sample were associated with combined relationship problems.

• The industries that showed the **highest** rate of employee relationship problems were Associations, Automotive, Oil & Gas, Unions, and Internet (31% of their accesses).

• The industries that showed the **second highest** rate of employee relationship problems were Aerospace & Aircraft, Agriculture, Education, Entertainment, Municipal & Public Sectors, Real Estate, and Utilities/Hydro (28% of their accesses).

• The industries that showed the **lowest rate** of employee relationship problems were Advertising, Communications & Media, Cosmetics, Legal, and Religious Organizations (20% of their accesses).

There are similarities among industries within these segments (e.g., labour in the first, not-for-profit in the second, communications in the third). This may suggest that there are reliable individual (e.g., attraction and selection) and/or organizational factors (e.g., job characteristics, culture) that bear on the quality of relationships for employees within these industries. This enables EAPs to tailor their services to particular types of organizational clients. These findings also suggest that there may be opportunities for EAP client organizations to work with one another to transfer HR best practices to promote healthy relationships among employees.

Which Provinces Report the Most Relationship Problems?

How do the provinces compare in EAP accesses for relationship problems? Again, CHAID analysis was used to classify provinces into segments on the basis of similar reports of relationship problems.

Relationship problems accounted for more EAP accesses in the Western provinces, combined (BC to Manitoba; 27% of all accesses) and less in Quebec (18% of all accesses). Numerous factors may account for this finding. It may be speculated that with economic growth in resource-rich regions comes work-life balance issues that impact relationship health. This may be especially relevant for transient working populations.

RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS AND STRESS

Some employee groups are reporting higher rates of relationship problems. However, are these employees more stressed by their relationship problems? Our data shows the following:

• Of people who accessed EAP for non-relationship problems, 79% reported that they were experiencing moderate to high levels of stress.

By comparison...

• for those reporting marital/relationship discord, 81% reported similar stress levels.
• For those reporting separation and divorce, 85% reported similar stress levels.
• For those reporting domestic violence, 91% reported similar stress levels.

Thus, relationship problems are associated with higher levels of stress. Previous research supports this. For example, one study indicates that men withdraw from their wives after more stressful work days. Both men and women are likely to respond to daily negative emotions in the workplace with more angry marital behaviours at home if their partners experienced similar work days.

How is this changing?

EAP clients that report relationship problems are also reporting lower levels of stress with each passing year.

Specifically:

• For clients reporting marital/relationship discord, the proportion that also reported high levels of stress decreased from 45% to 34% over four years.

• For clients reporting separation and divorce issues, the proportion that also reported high levels of stress decreased from 53% to 40% over four years.

• For clients reporting domestic violence, the proportion that also reported high levels of stress decreased from 69% to 55% over four years.

How is this to be interpreted? One explanation is that an increasing number of clients are accessing EAP for relationship problems in a preventive manner long before they lead to more serious physical and mental health issues. Clients that access EAP for problems while their stress is still low are better able to focus on and solve their problems in a constructive manner.

In general, our findings do not suggest that reports of relationship problems or associated stress levels are increasing with time. However, these analyses were conducted on our total sample (i.e., all organizational clients). Our analyses may yet uncover emerging relationship and stress-related problems in specific industries, client organizations, and specific employee segments.

CONCLUSIONS

Given that employee well-being has significant impacts on employee and organizational performance, employers would do well to explore ways of helping employees to build and maintain personal relationships outside of the workplace. If employers do not take action to create relationship-friendly work structures, the negative effects of work-life imbalance can make their way back into the workplace and impede both employee and organizational wellness.

What Can Employers Do?

Following are some actions that employers could take to foster healthy personal relationships between employees and their family members/loved ones:

Re-design jobs
• Explore roles, duties and accountabilities with employees. Find ways to reduce employee workloads and overtime (especially for supervisors and managers).

Offer training and developmental opportunities
• While job redesign considers how jobs impact personal relationships outside the workplace, training and development considers what employees can do differently to become more effective in the workplace.

Offer alternative work arrangements
• The availability of flextime work hours is associated with higher organizational commitment, job satisfaction and productivity, and less absenteeism, lateness and turnover.

• Telecommuting can lead to greater autonomy, more flexible work hours, and more time spent with partners if they are also home-based.

Create flexible career development programs
• Work with employees to create flexible career paths that are more aligned with their values and/or personal relationships.

Train supervisors and managers to be sensitive to employee relationship needs
• Employees with supervisors that are sensitive to their personal needs have higher job satisfaction and lower absenteeism than employees with non supportive supervisors.

Schedule events that build strong employee relationships
• Hold regular social events to give employees opportunities to build personal relationships in the workplace that transcend traditional teams. Having a

'best friend at work' predicts organizational performance measures such as customer satisfaction, profit, and productivity.

Offer EAPs

• EAPs offer a variety of supports that are specially designed to deal with relationships issues. EAP programs can also deliver wellness seminars on factors that affect relationships such as shiftwork and dealing with difficult teenagers. This is a cost effective way of reaching a large number of employees and preventing future relationship problems on a wide scale. In general, EAPs have been recognized by work psychologists as appropriate initiatives for promoting work-family balance.