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Electronically Enhanced Therapy

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Abstract (Document Summary)

As part of its Emotional Well-Being program, CIGNA Behavioral Health (CBH) has rolled out a homegrown, interactive, Web-based service for employee assistance program and behavioral management plan participants who suffer from anxiety, depression or substance abuse. Members are securely connected to a series of exercises that provide confidential, customized and clinically sound feedback about their mental health concerns, says Jody Aronson Prohofsky of CBH. The Internet-based services are designed to offer participants additional means to address behavioral health issues outside of traditional, face-to-face counseling sessions, according to Prohofsky. Plan participants can access the coaching tools through an employer's secure extranet site or through CBH's Web site.

Full Text (623 words)

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[Headnote]

Behavioral health plan rolls out online, interactive "coaching" series for members.

A behavioral health plan hopes a recently launched online educational series will target members who want to use the Internet to enhance treatment options.

As part of its Emotional Well-Being program, CIGNA Behavioral Health (CBH) rolled out a homegrown, interactive, Web-based service for employee assistance program and behavioral management plan participants who suffer from anxiety, depression or substance abuse. Members are securely connected to a series of exercises that provide confidential, customized and clinically sound feedback about their mental health concerns, says Jody Aronson Prohofsky, Ph.D., LMFT, vice president of clinical operations at CBH.

"When you think about behavioral health, sometimes there is a stigma," Prohofsky says. "If you break your arm, you go to the emergency room and someone will set the pieces. But when you have an emotional issue impacting areas of your life, the fix isn't that simple. We struggle with the traditional model of sending someone to face-to-face treatment as the only way to provide them with education." Since the program's initial launch in January, more than 1,000 members have used the interactive coaching tools.

The Internet-based services are designed to offer participants additional means to address behavioral health issues outside of traditional, face-to-face counseling sessions, according to Prohofsky. "The online coaching tools do not replace face-to-face therapy, nor are they designed to deal with severe crisis issues," she cautions.

Plan participants can access the coaching tools through an employer's secure extranet site or through CBH's Web site. Available free of charge to plan participants, users must first set up an account, which includes a secure username and password, helping to assure privacy and customize appropriate feedback and educational information. Once they sign in, users are given a brief overview, a program description and what they can expect. The program offers eight 20- to 30-

minute sessions per topic, Prohofsky says. Participants can work at their own pace, completing the session in one or more sittings.

An optional homework assignment is included that the participant can submit to a licensed behavioral health expert for confidential and personalized follow-up. "If the participant chooses, he or she can submit the homework to a coach, a live licensed clinician. The coach reads the homework and responds back to the user," Prohofsky says. "It's all done through the system -the user gets an e-mail box when he or she sets up the secure logon." The coach can offer personalized feedback and refer the person for face-to-face treatment if necessary.

CBH explored the possibility of offering online health tools about two years ago, says Prohofsky. "Our own experience showed that we, as individuals, went to the Web for health information," Prohofsky says. "And a number of studies have shown that health is among the top issues people search for." Rather than just provide a list of sites to refer clients to, or a generalized search engine, CBH opted to create its own Web-based educational component. That allowed the health plan to control the content and the quality of the materials its members were referred to.

Prohofsky hopes the online educational tools will not only augment traditional counseling, but also encourage others to seek assistance who might not otherwise go to a counselor. The service is offered free to CBH members, and it does not count against their benefits. "I think it's going to be a demand on all managed care companies to find alternative tools. Consumers are getting more savvy," Prohofsky says.

For more information about GIGNA Behavioral Health's Emotional Well-Being program, www.rsleads.com/408ht-206

[Sidebar]

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- Jody Aronson Prohofsky, Ph.D., LMFT
Vice President of Clinical Operations, CBH

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By Karin Lillis, Managing Editor

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