Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

The value of online communities and support boards

No matter what troubles you, from depression, grief or anxiety to food, substance abuse issues or other issues, there's likely an online community ready to lend an understanding ear and extend a helping hand. Many find online communities a safe haven to address their concerns behind a veil of anonymity.



Moreover, studies have confirmed that digital technologies, including online support boards, have tremendous potential to support participants and increase access to professional services.

Benefits of online support groups

Online communities, which include forums, discussion boards and chat rooms, allow users to interact with others who share similar problems and concerns. Many virtual communities are moderated by mental health professionals or regularly invite experts to participate. Those online communities with an expert presence add even more value to the group, as users can now access professional help from the comfort of home and the convenience of the keyboard.

Some of the benefits of joining an online community include:

- **Convenience** - You can login and get support at any time, day or night.
- **Privacy** - You can use a screen name and ask questions without embarrassment or fear of stigma.
- **Support** - Online communities are a great way to receive support from peers and professionals alike.
- **Sense of belonging** - It's comforting to know that you're not alone.
- **Opportunity to help others** - Many people continue to participate in online communities long after their initial needs have been met, transitioning to the role of survivor or supporter helping others.
- **Empowerment** - Access to information and support along with active participation can give you a sense of empowerment.
- **Understanding** - Hearing stories of how others have coped and getting practical advice about various treatment options can give you a better idea of what to expect.
- **Relief** - Being able to talk freely, openly, and honestly can also bring a sense of relief.

The efficacy of online communities

Technology allows us to access professional help and get support from others who are suffering with the same issues. Research has shown that those who enrolled in an automated depression Internet Training Program and participated in Internet support groups experienced a "significantly greater reduction in depressive symptoms at 6 and 12 months follow-up than the control group." Other studies show the potential of digital technologies in improving access to mental health care. For example, one study looked at an online system for people with eating disorders, which included email and moderated forum counselling. The results: 82 percent of users said they were highly satisfied; over half said that this was their first time receiving professional help; and half sought additional professional help once the online program concluded. Moreover, most participants who sought additional professional help said they would not have done so without the online program.

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Joining an online support group

Start by asking a health care provider for assistance. Your doctor, nurse, social worker, chaplain or psychologist may be able to recommend a support group for you, based on your specific needs. Similarly, you can talk to others you know with the same illness or life situation for suggestions, or contact an organization devoted to your cause. In this day of digital mental health, you can always find online support groups through social networking sites like Facebook, advocacy websites and email lists. LifeWorks's own workhealthlife.com live forum events are another great resource where you can gain health and wellness information, share your experiences, read those of others and get expert advice on a variety of health and wellness topics. Help, education, and peer support are readily available - online!