



Invited Commentary | Psychiatry

Employer-Sponsored Digital Health Platforms for Mental Wellness— A Good Investment

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Cost savings in mental health care are elusive, so we read the study by Hawrilenko et al¹ with interest. The authors evaluate an employer-sponsored digital health platform (Spring Health; Spring Care Inc) that screens employees for mental health conditions and, when warranted, connects them to treatment. Hawrilenko et al¹ found a reduction in health care spending among digital health platform users compared with a matched comparison group. These findings contribute to a broader literature that considers the economic value of employer-sponsored interventions aimed at mental wellness,^{2,3} although this topic is likely plagued by the file-drawer problem—that is, when null findings are not published.⁴

Hawrilenko et al¹ performed a rigorous evaluation and identified a positive return on investment (>\$1000 in savings per participant in the first year), which will be of interest to many both in and beyond the ivory tower. One strength of the study was its consideration of comorbidities, and the authors found greater cost savings for patients with chronic pain and gastrointestinal issues. This finding is consistent with studies showing that psychotherapy, particularly cognitive behavior therapy, is effective for treating these conditions.^{5,6} It also speaks to the potential spillover effects of mental health care for individuals with physical health conditions and higher medical risk.

An additional strength of the study by Hawrilenko et al¹ is the customizability of the digital health platform. Its components range from self-guided content to in-person psychotherapy and medication management, which can be used when clinically appropriate. It was unclear which type of psychotherapy was provided and by whom, or what the share of employees who used medication or the self-guided content was and to what degree. More details on the different components of the platform, the training and certification of clinicians who were providing the treatment, and the details of the treatment itself could shed light on the mechanisms of action.

Hawrilenko et al¹ discuss potential drivers behind their findings, including a reduction in the financial barriers to care (employer subsidized program costs), a modern web-based platform, and more consistent use of measurement-based care by practitioners. Although these components were not individually measured in their study, they are all viable explanations. Future research could explore which components contributed to uptake of the platform and to improved patient outcomes.

There are broader implications of the study by Hawrilenko et al,¹ because employer-sponsored digital health platforms are among the quickest and easiest pathways to grant a majority of US individuals accessible mental health care. It is important to demonstrate cost savings for a platform like that used by the authors, because it could encourage more employers to value, invest in, and improve the mental well-being of their employees (especially for employers who are managing their own risk pool; as of 2023, two-thirds of covered workers are in self-funded plans⁷).

Nonetheless, we wonder whether an insistence on cost savings to justify investment in a digital health program for mental wellness may undermine its true value, which can be difficult or even impossible to capture. For instance, Hawrilenko et al¹ relied on insurance claims data and were only able to calculate the return on investment attributable to reduced health care costs. Do employers need to demonstrate short-term cost savings to provide better resources for their employees, especially when the benefits of good mental health care are far reaching—perhaps fewer dollars spent on health care, but also enhanced productivity in the workplace or even a higher quality of life?

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Mental health care is not a sunk cost. It is a long-term investment, with effects that can accrue and that are notoriously difficult to measure. It is also relatively low cost, dominated by talk therapy, generic medications, and, increasingly, digital health platforms like the one studied by Hawrilenko et al.¹ Given the growing rates of anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions in the US⁸ and the idea that employer-sponsored programs may be our single greatest opportunity to expand mental health care for much of the country, we should consider more than just cost savings when justifying new programs with far-reaching consequences to improve mental wellness.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

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