



Why Does Your Employee Keep Resisting Support

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BeyondEAP

Specialist employee support
for life's toughest challenges

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Addressing Secondary Gain: A Guide for HR Professionals



As an HR professional, you might have experienced the following scenario.

A line manager talks to you in confidence about an employee whom they feel needs extra help. Yet when you approach the employee to offer the required support, they aren't as receptive as you expected them to be. They might resist your recommendations altogether, or the therapist you referred them to mentions that they've been unavailable, or worse cancelling their appointments.

Thankfully, we rarely encounter this scenario at Beyond EAP. Most employees welcome the bespoke support that specialist companies like ours provide. They are usually willing, engaged, and fully committed to gaining all they can from our relationship – and of course, grateful to HR for listening and responding to their needs.



SO, WHY DOES YOUR EMPLOYEE KEEP RESISTING

SUPPORT

In psychology and counselling, “secondary gain” is a term used to describe a significant subconscious motivator a person may have, which is either fabricated or exaggerated for personal gain.

For example, while a primary gain is the actual reason a person can’t go to work, such as illness or injury, a secondary gain is when the person uses illness or injury as an excuse not to come to work.

So, in other words your employee could be benefiting from not getting the support you have recommended. It may feel easier – and safer – for them to stay exactly where they are, than try to overcome the problem.

It is worth pointing out that secondary gain is often unconscious, and at Beyond EAP we have seen first-hand how it can impair an employee’s progress in therapy. So once identified, secondary gain should not be ignored.

However, addressing secondary gain with an employee can be a delicate and sensitive process that requires time and trust to navigate successfully. The aim should be to guide the employee gently towards recognising and understanding their hidden motivation, relinquish its power, and move towards genuine healing.

How might secondary gain show itself?

Therapists recognise secondary gain when an employee never has availability for appointments, doesn’t prioritise enough time, or cancels sessions at the last minute.

The employee could then put a procession of obstacles forward, such as not having anywhere private to talk, or they have other time-limiting responsibilities that mean they just can’t fit anything else in. Any reason will do, as long as it means they don’t have to face the work involved.

Here are some other ways in which secondary gain might be identified.

Lack of progress in therapy:

if the employee shows little progress or improvement, the therapist should discuss secondary gain as a reason for non-engagement, without breaking client confidentiality.

Avoidance of responsibility:

such as when symptoms or issues help the employee avoid certain responsibilities or tasks that they find challenging or uncomfortable.

Attention-seeking:

some employees might receive attention and sympathy due to their symptoms, which can be reinforcing. The attention might provide a sense of significance or validation that they may not experience in other areas of their life, so they don’t want it to stop.

Protection from change:

engaging in therapy and making significant changes in life can be daunting for some people. Secondary gain may therefore protect the employee from the uncertainty and potential challenges that come with personal growth.

Identity and sense of self:

the employee’s symptoms or issues might be intertwined with their identity, giving them a sense of who they are and what sets them apart from others. Letting go of these issues through therapy could invoke fear of losing a part of themselves.

As an HR professional, how can you identify secondary gain at work?

Consistent attendance issues:

an employee who frequently calls in sick or takes leaves of absence without a clear medical explanation might be using their symptoms to avoid work or specific tasks.

Unexplained performance patterns:

if an employee's performance fluctuates with no apparent reason for the inconsistency, it may be worth exploring any underlying motivations at play.

Frequent complaints or grievances:

employees who regularly complain about their work environment or colleagues without showing any interest in resolving the issues might be seeking attention or sympathy.

Resistance to change or improvement:

employees who resist any attempts to improve their work processes or skills may be using their current performance issues as a way to avoid change.

Inconsistencies in medical documentation:

check for inconsistencies in medical documentation provided by the employee to support their absences or work limitations.

Disproportionate emotional reactions:

an employee who consistently reacts disproportionately to workplace situations might be using their emotional responses to manipulate or gain sympathy from others.

Seeking special treatment:

employees who frequently request work adjustments or exceptions without a clear justification may be seeking preferential treatment.

Social dynamics:

observing how an employee interacts with colleagues and supervisors can provide insights into whether they use their symptoms to gain attention or control social situations.

History of similar issues:

if the employee has a pattern of experiencing similar issues across different workplaces or contexts, this could be a sign of secondary gain.

How can you approach secondary gain with your employee?

Supporting an employee who is showing signs of secondary gain requires a compassionate and understanding approach. Always keep in mind that there might be legitimate underlying issues that are affecting your employee's behaviour.


You should work closely with the employee, their supervisor, and possibly a mental health professional (such as our team at Beyond EAP) to gain a comprehensive understanding of the situation before making any decisions.


Addressing secondary gain in the workplace requires a thoughtful and supportive approach that focuses on understanding the employee's individual needs and motivations, whilst also promoting a healthy working environment for everyone else.

Clearly HR professionals should not offer therapy, but you can still take several supportive steps to help the employee address their underlying motivations. These steps are outlined below.

Schedule a private conversation:


set aside some time with the employee to discuss their behaviour and any concerns that have been observed. Create a safe, confidential space for them to share their feelings and experiences openly.


 **Active listening:** pay close attention to the employee's perspective and try to understand their challenges and motivations without judgment. Validate their feelings and experiences to help build a sense of trust.

 **Show empathy and compassion:** let the employee know that you are there to support them through any difficulties they are facing, even if their motivations seem strange or counterproductive to

you. Encourage open communication:

make it clear to the employee that open communication about their challenges at work will be valued and taken seriously.

 **Explore underlying issues:** work with the employee to identify any underlying issues that could be contributing to their behaviour. This may involve seeking input from mental health professionals or other relevant experts.

 **Refer support services:** provide information about specialist support – such as that provided by Beyond EAP – which will help the employee to address their challenges in a safe and professional way.



What practical steps can you take to improve your employee's performance?

Set clear expectations:

while being supportive is vital, it's also essential to set clear expectations about the employee's job performance and behaviour. Let them know that their actions need to align with the company's standards and values.

Develop a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP):

if the employee's behaviour is negatively impacting their work performance, consider implementing a clear PIP that outlines specific goals and expectations for improvement.

Involve management:

work closely with the employee's supervisor or line manager to ensure they are aware of the situation and to provide consistent support and guidance.

Offer education:

if it feels appropriate, introduce the concept of secondary gain and how it can impact different people in various ways. This type of awareness may help the employee learn more about their behaviour and empower them to change.

Monitor progress:

regularly check in with the employee to discuss their progress and offer ongoing support. Recognise and celebrate any positive changes or improvements.

Remember that addressing secondary gain requires patience and understanding. It is essential to approach every situation with a focus on the employee's individual wellbeing, in a way that also minimises negative impact on the rest of their team and the wider organisation.

Each case is unique, so customised support plans may be necessary to help the employee work through their challenges and reach a more productive and positive state.

For further guidance, or to discuss a specific issue in confidence, please contact us at Beyond EAP



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