

From family therapy to employee benefits— what my career has taught me about advocacy

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People are often surprised when they learn that before I launched a 25-year employee benefits career, I worked as a family therapist. For six years, I counseled couples and families navigating some of life's toughest challenges. Many had been through serious trauma – loss of loved ones to violence, incarceration, severe mental health crises. Most wanted to get their lives back on track but felt that some of the systems designed to help them were almost working against them.

More than two decades later, I find myself working in the world of employee benefits, and I can't help but notice the same sense of frustration many feel when it comes to the healthcare system. A system designed to help us shouldn't be so difficult to navigate, yet the words I hear time and again to describe it include "complex," "confusing," and "frustrating."

At some point, most of us have probably received a medical bill we didn't understand charging a surprisingly high fee for a service we thought was covered. In this situation, many people just pay the bill, assuming it's correct.

Others might begin a long and frustrating series of phone calls to get answers that sometimes still don't make sense. Still others will pay a visit to their HR department seeking guidance.

This isn't how any of us want to spend our time, but I believe advocacy is part of the solution.

Optavise Advocacy services and our new Optavise Clear offering help people get answers when they receive that surprising medical bill, when a diagnosis leaves them unsure what next steps to take, or when they're prescribed a medication they simply can't afford. Our human advocates get on the phone and get answers – no matter how long it takes.

A quick example of what I mean: I once had a colleague on my team text me in a panic from the hospital in the middle of the night. His wife was experiencing a serious medical emergency. Several grueling nights and days followed. On the day he brought his wife home, my colleague received a phone call from the hospital. Rather than calling to inquire after her health, the representative called to say my friend owed the hospital \$8,000. He was at a loss.

I told him to call John, his Optavise advocate. John stepped in and took over, made the necessary calls, learned what the fees were for, and ultimately discovered the errors the hospital had made in its billing. An \$8,000 bill became a \$3,000 bill, and my friend didn't have to spend any time on the phone when his attention needed to be on his wife.

That's what our advocates do. From big to small questions about benefits, our advocates are on it. They give their direct line, their email address, and their time to get answers and help make a challenging situation less so. They're trained to navigate this complex system. They're recruited because of their patient and empathetic ways.

They're the superhero when employees need one the most.

We need advocates to help us navigate many of life's systems. Until that's commonplace, Optavise can be a model for other systems. We're far from solving everything about healthcare that needs changing, but our advocates make a positive difference in people's lives.

I'm proud to be a small part of this through my role with Optavise, and I'm confident advocacy can be part of eradicating employee confusion and frustration with their benefits.

