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EAPs: a beginner's guide

Allan Turner discusses the responsibilities, competencies and opportunities for an EAP counsellor

An employee assistance programme (EAP) is a service paid for by an employing organisation that provides a range of support services to the organisation's employees and, in most cases, immediate family members. A central component of an EAP is the provision of face-to-face, short-term counselling either near to or where the employee lives or works. To provide this service, EAP providers have a network of 300-700 affiliate counsellors who work for the EAP provider on a fee-for-service basis. The EAP provider's affiliate network of counsellors needs to cover a wide geographical area as most EAPs require that the staff of corporate clients will not have to travel more than 15 or 20 miles to see a counsellor.

The EAP provider has usually agreed a contract with a corporate client (the employing organisation) saying that they will provide face-to-face counselling for their employees whenever requested (provided counselling is appropriate) and always within a few days. The corporate client has bought this contract because they understand the significant benefits that counselling (and many other aspects of the contract) will bring to their staff. It always seems to me that the interests of the employee

and employer are often the same. The employee wants to get through the difficulty as quickly as possible and the employer wants a happy, well functioning workforce. EAP counselling can often help employee and employer to achieve this goal.

Qualities of an EAP counsellor

So what are the necessary qualities to be a successful EAP counsellor working for an EAP provider? Oddly, most of them are unlikely to be addressed during college training and often do not seem to be part of the natural skill set of those attracted to counselling. The first is speed. The EAP will usually have contracted that they will provide counselling quickly. EAPs do not have waiting lists. If an employee requests counselling on a Monday she can expect to see her counsellor for the first time in the same week. This is in stark contrast to charities which often offer appointments in weeks and the NHS which can take months. So to be successful in this field you need to be able to move fast and offer appointments within a few days.

When the case manager at the EAP wants to place a client with you, they need you to respond quickly. Using an answerphone is a minimum

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requirement and is probably not going to let you produce a quick enough response. You need a mobile that you carry with you and *turn on*. Mobiles are for EAPs to contact you quickly, they are not devices only to be used if the car breaks down! I have noticed a recent questionable practice where EAPs leave a message with various counsellors and give the work to the first one to return the call. I have called back a case manager, on a Sunday, within 20 minutes of a message being left for me, only to be told that I am too late! The potential referral has gone elsewhere. EAPs can hardly expect respect from counsellors who are treated in such a cynical way.

You certainly need to be flexible. If you can only see clients on a Wednesday between 1-3pm EAPs will find it hard to place clients with you. Ideally you should be *available* between 8.30am and 8.30pm. It is not realistic to expect EAP clients, who often work full time, to fit their life around you.

Confidentiality

Counsellors who are new to EAPs often get confused about who the client is and their duty of confidentiality. Obviously this is more complicated than if I see a private client, but EAPs always offer clear contracts that will guide you through this. As an EAP counsellor I have a contractual duty to the client and also to the EAP. As an ethical practitioner I also adhere to the BACP ethical framework. In practice I have seldom found these obligations conflictory. The concept in my mind is that I am a professional counsellor working for an EAP and I owe a duty of ethical practice to the client. I will share all relevant information with the EAP, but I will be respectful of the client's confidentiality too. So a good example of that would be that I will give honest and detailed feedback to the EAP about drug and alcohol use and pay particular attention to this if the employee is in a safety critical job (train driver or airline pilot for instance). On the other hand, if a client discussed anxieties about breast operations I would feed back that the client

had anxieties about her body image and shape. The client's right to privacy could still be respected.

The key issue is to be very clear with the client about what information is passed back to the EAP. Whenever possible, complete forms in the presence of clients and always show them any forms you have to complete about them. As well as having worked for 10 years as an affiliate for most EAP providers, I have also worked as an EAP case manager for a major EAP provider and I know that EAP providers genuinely go to a lot of trouble to protect the client's confidentiality and do not feed back identifiable details to employers. They will only report in general statistical terms saying how many employees have used the scheme, giving broad presenting problems headings. I point out to clients that confidentiality is the backbone of our work. If I or an EAP broke confidentially inappropriately this news would spread very fast around a workplace. Both I and the EAP would quickly be in trouble because clients would not come to see us. Confidentiality is not an afterthought, it goes to the absolute core of an EAP provider's work. If they get it wrong they are out of business – it is as stark as that. Generally I have felt supported by EAP providers. Our profession is becoming increasingly litigious. When I receive a solicitor's letter demanding my case notes (which happens about every six months) I find it reassuring to pass it on to the EAP provider, unanswered, knowing that I am unlikely to see it again.

With only a few exceptions, EAP providers frequently refer clients to counsellors who see clients in their own home. This seems to me to belong to a past age and I am surprised that EAP providers are prepared to send senior staff of large corporate clients to a counsellor who will see them in a back bedroom or dining room. This seems to me to expose all parties to the contract to completely unnecessary risks. EAP providers are now significant opinion formers and standard setters in the modern counselling world and I think this is an issue they need to grasp.

Data protection

In my experience EAP providers have been slow in responding to the Data Protection Act. Most have now introduced 'statements of understanding'. This explains to the client the circumstances under which confidentiality will be broken (usually in the event of harm or possible suicide). It also says that records will be kept. It is a legal requirement that a client gives informed consent to records being kept and by requiring the client to sign the form before counselling starts the consent is clear and provable. Some EAP providers still have not introduced statements of understanding.

In other respects the counselling profession is poor at complying with the Data Protection Act. Few counsellors are registered under the Act in spite of a legal obligation to do so. Unfortunately, registration is complicated and time consuming, although there are specialist agencies who will handle the registration for counsellors. Be careful who you approach because there have been some scams in this field where the agency takes the money but does not process the registration. Your contract with the EAP provider will require you to comply with the Act, and the BACP ethical framework also requires this. I find it odd that EAPs require counsellors to send a copy of their insurance certificate each year, but they ignore the data protection certificate.

A similar situation exists with enhanced disclosure from the Criminal Records Bureau when working with children and vulnerable people. It is surprising that few EAP providers ensure that their counsellors have checks, even though good practice makes this necessary. It is now argued that *any* client in one-to-one counselling is a vulnerable person and should therefore have enhanced CRB disclosure.

Good communication

To be successful working with a company providing EAPs, you need to be a team player. It is no good thinking that your work is so special and unique that no one else would really understand it. The EAP provider will, quite legitimately, ask you what you are doing with *their* client. You need to be able to encapsulate your work in as few words as possible. There is every chance that the case manager's training will be of a different orientation from your own. After a few years you may find that you are more experienced than the case manager. You need to be able to effectively communicate with this person. Explain your work in terms they can understand and supply the necessary information.

The range of clients that an EAP provider can send you is one of the most attractive elements to me. If you work for a charity most of your clients

will often be on low incomes. If you work in private practice you will only see those who can afford your fees. As an EAP affiliate counsellor I have had senior staff from blue chip companies through to people with little formal education and in considerable debt. I don't think you could get such variety elsewhere and I certainly enjoy that.

Value for money

It is true that the pay scales of EAP providers have changed little in the last 10 years or so and therefore they are not as attractive as they once were. I have also noticed a curious correlation between EAP providers who pay badly, for example £25/£30 a session, and those who expect a great deal of time-consuming reporting back to them in the form of a report after every counselling session. Having said that, I think the companies providing EAPs offer good value for money. They have borne all the acquisition costs and have sent you clients you would never have got yourself. EAP providers also tend to pay regularly and as promptly as it is reasonable to expect.

Short-term work

Person-centred counsellors sometimes say that the limited number of sessions (usually between three and eight) offered by EAP schemes is unrealistic; some will even say that it is unethical. I completely disagree. First, I do not see the limited number of sessions as a condition of worth, it is a boundary that the client and I have agreed to operate within. Second, I have often found it therapeutically beneficial. In many cases the client 'cuts their suit to match the cloth'. They do complete the work in the allotted number of sessions. In fact I often prefer six sessions to eight. Six is obviously short-term work, eight starts to hint at something more long term, which can't actually be offered.

So for me employee assistance counselling work is good. I have a few reservations where EAP providers seem to be supporting a sort of 'cottage industry' approach to the profession and are therefore not playing their part in raising standards as quickly as I would like to see. On the other hand they are now significant players in the counselling world. They have eliminated waiting lists in the areas they work and have brought counselling to a whole range of people who would not have known about it or been able to afford it. Is the world a better or worse place because of the existence of EAP counselling? I have no doubt that their contribution has been significant and valuable. Long may they continue to grow and strive for higher levels of professionalism for themselves and the counsellors they employ. ■

