

'We have a referral for you'

Gordon Machin presents a day in the life of an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) affiliate counsellor

Just as I have a mouthful of cereal at a late breakfast, have gone to the loo, or am leaving the house with little time to spare for a meeting, comes that phone call asking if I have space to take a referral from an EAP provider. Almost invariably the answer is yes, and I am given a name and a very brief outline of the problem. Some external providers will then pass my phone number to the prospective client to make the initial call, and others leave that to me. If I am lucky there will be a response from the client, or I manage to make contact, but days may pass without either of these things happening. Is this because the client has already unburdened their problem onto a phone counsellor at the EAP provider? Is it apprehension about following through to face-to-face contact? Or have they gone on holiday?

Most of the EAPs with whom I have worked have a travelling time and distance criteria for clients to get to my premises. I do wonder at times, however, about the accuracy of their map reading. I live in the North West, my postcode is clear and I have given the EAP provider, in most cases, an indication of the area I cover. It is surprising that when I ask in that referral call where the client lives – this information often is not volunteered – that they are across the Irish Sea, in Norfolk, or have no means of transport.

Another requirement by most EAP providers is that clients should be offered an appointment within five to seven days, unless there are critical and urgent needs which may be identified by a variety of flag colours – pink, yellow, red. I muse about the need for a white flag to wave when the client fails to turn up for the first appointment or, as has happened, arrives on the wrong day. With luck, a fair wind, and the ability to follow the directions I have given, the client arrives for the first appointment, usually on time, but up to half an hour late if they have turned left instead of right. What is more of a problem is if in their anxiety they arrive up to half an hour early when I am in my gardening clothes or trying to get the window



cleaner away from the consulting room.

Now the 'fun' begins. Each of the EAP providers – they provide the clients, but prefer to believe that they are providing a service – has a different set of procedures and protocols. These may include forms of varying complexity regarding confidentiality, note keeping, and possibly a client information leaflet, much of which describes what counselling is not about. There seems to be an assumption that the newcomer to counselling knows what it is about. 'Both the media and people in general have a fairly clear idea of the purpose of therapy', says Craig McDevitt, former chair of BACP. It is perhaps easier to explain to the new client who has accessed help via a call centre, what is not going to happen. As some respondents in my current research have said about their perceptions of counselling; 'I'll give this a try but I wasn't expecting it to do anything', or 'as far as I was concerned counselling was for those destined for the loony bin', and 'I wondered whether it would be a waste of time'.

So there we are, the client not sure what it is about, and me trying to remember if the EAP I am working for with this client demands a detailed assessment, or says it doesn't want an assessment, needs a DSM IV diagnostic impression or specifically states that there should not be any diagnostic label. What is common to the EAP providers for whom I work is that the counselling will be 'brief and time limited', which is interesting because there is a distinction between the two, in that brief 'does not specify a limited number of sessions or an ending date'². In practice, the number of sessions has already been decided, perhaps with regard to

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clinical need, but also because cost already has been negotiated with the employer – or as one clinical director has suggested, ‘it is like sticking your finger in the air’. The client may have from three to eight hours’ worth of counselling and how we use that productively is up to us; but it isn’t really, because in some instances the style of working and spacing of sessions are prescribed, the frequency of reporting back and case management by the EAP is different and procedures have been formalised almost to the extent of undermining the judgment and professionalism of the counsellor.

In spite of this, as Coles³ states: ‘Overall the affiliate-EAP relationship appears to be successful and productive for all involved’. There is, however, a fine balance to be maintained. My research in 1995⁴ established that nearly two-thirds of a sample of 73 affiliates rated their satisfaction at the higher end of the scale, and in spite of the problems in this type of work were able to identify a number of positive features, for clients and themselves.

I still share this view, but EAPs could do more in a number of ways to foster good relationships with the affiliates who are their front line with clients. Examples might include:

- asking affiliates for feedback on how they find their paperwork or email systems – a user-friendly format that works for all parties
- be more consistent in updating information about client organisations
- some formal opportunity for training and learning from each other
- a chance to meet and network with other affiliates
- a reasonable market rate for counselling fees.

At this stage of writing I have become more like many a client – feeling out of sorts about the employer. The client may become empowered to the point of deciding that the best thing is to move on, either within their organisation, or outside. In some parallel process I reflect about my choices, and motivation, especially when writing up client notes, sometimes at length for particular providers. Does it get read, and by whom? Never in the thousands of hours of this work for EAPs has anyone come back to ask about what I have written, and only two three time has there been any feedback. Now CORE forms are added, and like the rest of the paper disappears into the letter box down the road – and sometimes never reappears. This happens to invoices as well, but not too often, otherwise I would have stopped long ago, although there is one EAP which does seem to act as the tortoise in the payment race making me wonder if it is time to do something about it.

It is not all negative! My heart warms when some EAPs call, especially those (and there are some) who

- have provided me with a clear and concise affiliate manual designed to help me, rather than protect the EAP
- trust me sufficiently not to require session by session feedback
- recognise that there are some rare cases when it is in the client’s interest to extend the number of sessions
- may occasionally reciprocate and give me some feedback.

I noted that Allan Turner mentioned flexibility in his description of EAP work⁵, but there are two other ‘f’ words that come to mind. Frustration when I respond to a message from an EAP to be told that another affiliate has got there before me. Who are all these phantom local affiliates? Finally there is the fantasy that perhaps someone out there might remember that I still do take referrals. Even after this article.

I really do not mind when you telephone me! ■

References

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- 2 Dryden W, Feltham C. Brief counselling. Buckingham: Open University Press; 1992.
- 3 Coles A. Counselling in the workplace. Maidenhead: Open University Press; 2003.
- 4 McLeod J. Counselling in the workplace: the facts. Rugby: BACP; 2001.
- 5 Turner A. EAPs: a beginner’s guide. Counselling at Work. 2005;49:15-7.