

AN OVERVIEW OF EAP / EFAP
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A well-run Employee Assistance Program is an extremely good investment for both the employer and the employees. The EAP benefit is a workplace benefit and a very specialized one. Such a benefit is essential in maintaining a healthy, productive and profitable organization. Counsellors who continue (and plan to continue) to derive a significant portion of their income from Employee Assistance Programs keep abreast of the on-going evolution of the EAP field.

EAPs have evolved from the early years when they dealt primarily with alcohol and drug issues in the workplace. In the 1970's EAP work expanded to include personal and mental health issues of employees and their immediate family members. Most organizations today have an EFAP benefit referring to Employee and Family Assistance Programs. (For the purposes of this article I will use EAP) A further expansion in the field of EAPs involved broadening their clinical and organizational services for promoting workplace productivity.

The aftermath of September 11th, 2001 put the Employee Assistance Program field in the limelight with the recognition of their invaluable role in dealing with employees, their families and EAP colleagues impacted by the terrorists' attacks. The impact of such an event forces EAPs to review and reflect on the way they provide certain services (e.g. critical incident debriefings). Such reflection produces flexibility, creativity and innovative thinking in the goal towards continuous quality of service improvement in the EAP field.

EAPs, however, are in place because of the belief that improving an employee's quality of life will result in increased employee productivity and increased profitability for the employer. Much of EAP work revolves around EAP counsellors helping troubled employees attain improved quality of life by helping the clients solve their immediate problems. That is to say, the problem that has led the client into counselling at this point in time. The counsellor's thorough assessment uncovers the full scope of the problem(s) to be addressed.

The EAP counsellor recognizes that he/she has two clients in the counselling chair. The two clients are the client sitting in the chair and the organization that pays the EAP benefit. This is referred to as *the dual-client relationship* and this relationship is a constant reminder to the counsellor of his/her neutral role as an EAP professional. The EAP counsellor's role is to ascertain as soon as possible what brought the client into counselling now and what can be done to get this client back to work fully functioning.

EAP counselling services, though session-limited, can be seen as a unique gift to employees and their immediate family members since many clients would not have the opportunity nor the comfort to seek counselling if it were not for their EAP.

Depending on the EAP model, session limits can be an *Assess and Refer* model (i.e. 1 – 3 sessions) to session caps of 5 – 8 sessions and sometimes a few more sessions for couples and families, not always. Counselling services involve a thorough assessment, brief solution-focused therapy and if necessary referral and follow-up. Most EAPs are a full service EAP i.e. they provide and adhere to all the core technology functions of EAP.

I have been in the EAP field for over 10 years as a clinical counsellor, program manager, clinical supervisor, National Director and now an independent consultant to EAPs, organizations and EAP counsellors. I love EAP work because it blends my previous business experience with my counselling expertise. In the last few years especially, countless number of resumes from skilled clinicians have crossed my desk and I have provided numerous consultation calls to clinicians doing EAP work mostly for organizational contracts that I have managed. The vast majority of the counsellors that I have dealt with are highly skilled clinicians yet many appear to lack knowledge-depth in EAP. Such lack of knowledge can cost EAP providers a significant loss of revenue. Yes, we are talking money. EAP is a business and EAP providers need to pay attention to their bottom-line so that they can remain competitive and viable.

For instance a client may be entitled to up-to-six sessions, however if work can be done in 3 rather than 4 or 5 sessions or if a client presents with a longer-term issue in the 1st session and can be referred in the 1st or 2nd session rather than the 4th or 5th session, then these “extra” sessions make a huge difference to both the EAP provider and the organization to which it serves. These extra sessions have a huge impact on the financial viability of an EAP provider. Granted some clients will need all their sessions yet many will not.

Accreditation has been in place in the healthcare industry for many years. The recent move towards accrediting EAP providers is to ensure accountability and due diligence in all aspects of EAP work. Therefore, it stands to reason that counsellors doing EAP work will eventually need to demonstrate their EAP knowledge either through the acquisition of the CEAP credential or by seeking out EAP-related professional development hours.

The pulse of the news around us indicates that our society, economy, families, communities, and organizations continue to be unsettled in a world that is off-balance and like many of our clients we too are thrust into ongoing change. As many of us assess our clients for resiliency to ensure that they can cope with their current situation and plan for their future, we in the EAP field, also need to cope with and embrace change and continue to plan for our future in this challenging and evolving field.

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