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Ten Years Later

The Impact of 9/11: A Decade of Change

"The biggest change we have seen is an increase in reported mental health issues and work-related problems stemming from psychological issues. ... These issues take up much more of my time than any addiction issue."

By John Tuttle, LCSW, CADC, CEAP, SAP
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September 10, 2001, was the last day that employee assistance programs could cling to a model that did not include crisis intervention. The next day, the manner in which we would respond to the needs of our constituents was changed forever. Post 9/11 society is different: it's less innocent, and fear and anxiety are more pervasive.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of 9/11. The EA profession has changed as the needs of employees and our corporate clients have changed. In fact, we would say that 9/11 not only changed incidence response – it dramatically altered how EA professionals respond to workplace needs. The intent of this article is to examine the *specific* effects that 9/11 has had on EAPs.

We polled EAP practitioners who responded to 9/11/2001, and who remain active in the field. We asked the following question:

In what way has EAP work changed in 2011 that can be specifically attributed to the events on 9/11/2001?

Responses varied around two central themes – how EAP work has changed; and how employees' problems have altered.

How Work has Changed for EAPs

Roberto Mendez, Patty French, and Al Abromitis shared their thoughts about how their practices changed soon after 9/11 and how the event refocused EAP work on basic needs. Employees were now affected by issues that had not been a part of the workplace for quite some time, including furloughs, significant financial concerns, mental health issues, and an increase in prescription drug and alcohol use.

Roberto Mendez, Northwestern United States Regional Representative, International Association of Machinists, United Airlines:

"Prior to 9/11 an EAP coordinator's work was mainly one-to-one (face-to-face). After 9/11 we were forced to work with hundreds of people at any one time, as we became the source of services for the scores of people who lost their jobs as the result of this tragedy. With the help of San Mateo Labor Council we were able to pull together many services for employees affected by layoffs. We also saw an increase in the number of people with high levels of depression, and increased use of prescription

medications (which is even more pronounced today). Moreover, use of alcohol was prevalent – and we had to deal with a problem that we didn't have a lot of experience with – that is, employees who lost their homes due to critical financial situations."

Patty French, Association of Professional Flight Attendants, American Airlines:

"The biggest change we have seen is an increase in reported mental health issues and work-related problems stemming from psychological issues. We are seeing a great deal more depression and anxiety. These issues take up much more of my time than any addiction issue."

Al Abromitis, Retired Airline Chairman, International Association of Machinists, United Airlines:

"There is a keen awareness that another major event could occur at any time. Critical incidence response has taken on a more important role in EAP work, and EAPs are getting more information and training in preparation to respond effectively when the next major event occurs."

Employees Have Expressed Different Problems

Maryann Shepard, Deb Reynolds, Ellyn Kravette, Karla Holt, and Kerry Curtis conveyed the differences they have seen in employees' problems. A lost sense of security and trust, combined with magnified anxiety, and a lack of feeling that everything will be all right are common themes related in this section.

Maryann Shepard, United Airlines EAP Representative, Chicago:

"Clients share several residual themes: a feeling that the world is not safe, a kind of loss of innocence, an overall sense of mistrust, and the realization there are no assurances or guarantees that our lives will be all right. On the bright side: we realized we are resilient and have the ability to learn, which is a very useful tool in all aspects of our lives. We also have an increased sense of camaraderie; we realized we are all in this together."

Deb Reynolds, Director of Benefits, Employee Assistance, United Airlines:

"I can sum it up in one word whenever there is an emergency today – and that word is *hyperawareness!*"

Ellyn Kravette, EAP Manager, New York, American Airlines:

"There has been a shift in the sense of security. As a society we are more aware that we live in a world of fluctuation, be it financial, social, or governmental. This is probably a more realistic view than we had before. Those who want to change the world are more frustrated and

angry. Those who compare themselves to others (and for whom there is never enough) continue to be frightened and bitter. For those who see it as an opportunity for personal change – it has been a time of growth. Many people have found that the key to living continues to be having an appreciation for the moment."

Karla Holt, Employee Assistance Counselor, Denver International Airport Office of Employee Assistance – (Karla was the Customer Service EAP Representative for United Airlines when 9/11 occurred.

Today, she is with the City and County of Denver EAP): "I am aware of an underlying sense of anxiety and anxiousness, a magnified distrust of the world and, a 'Will I be OK?' mindset that seems to be part of many clients' views today. It's as if their anxiety level has 'amped up,' affecting all aspects of our lives. Prior to 9/11, my clients had everyday conflicts, including workplace problems, home/life issues and personal issues, but there was still a solid 'bedrock' or sense that everything would be OK. Today, reflecting about personal and world situations in catastrophic terms seems to be the norm, even though many people are not aware of the underlying current of anxiety. The sense of, 'Everything will be OK' has switched to, 'It's not going to get better.'"

Kerry Curtis, Transportation Workers Union EAP Coordinator, Dallas Fort Worth, American Airlines:

"Employees began to distrust co-workers based on race and religion even though the U.S. has a diverse population with many cultures. I was amazed at how some people began to question fellow workers that they had worked with for many years. We still have mechanics carrying pictures of the twin towers in their pockets."

Summary

The EAP field has changed significantly over the past 10 years – a great deal of which has been due to 9/11 and the things we have learned from our response to the incident. The biggest changes have involved the increased response to basic needs, and the greater number of clients' problems. As a result, we have become much more proficient at responding with an array of intervention strategies.

Additionally, developing resources that can be counted on to deliver a wide variety of outcomes for our clients has become a critical part of EAP business. Focuses on these areas – developed during the past decade – have provided a solid foundation for continuing EAP work.

As EA professionals build upon 9/11 and continue to expand our services, we will press on and incorporate the lessons that this tragedy taught us. In so doing, we will grow our profession into a force that will enhance workplace effectiveness and improve the quality of life for all employees. ✦

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