
**EMPLOYEE
ASSISTANCE
PROGRAMS**



**A Guide For
Counselors**

**Daniel Lanier, Jr., DSW, ACSW
Muriel C. Gray, PhD, LCSW, CAC
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PREFACE

Employee Assistance Programs: A Guide for Counselors is one of three handbooks in a series of publications that present the basics of employee assistance program (EAP) development, implementation, and management. *A Guide for Counselors*, which presents an overview of the EAP field and discusses the role of the EAP counselor, has been updated since the first edition was published in 1985.

The other two handbooks in the series are *Employee Assistance Programs: A Guide for Administrators and Consultants*, which provides guidelines for EAP administrators and consultants and includes case studies of program implementation, and *Employee Assistance Programs: A Guide to Community Resources*, which provides the results of a national survey of EAP practitioners and offers a model for identifying, selecting, and evaluating community resources.

All three publications were initially written for students who are planning a career in the EAP field and for novices in the field. However, EAP professionals with a number of years of experience will also find the updated editions of the handbooks informative and helpful.

INTRODUCTION

This handbook is designed to acquaint counselors with employee assistance program (EAP) attributes and basic practice concepts. Its purpose is to encourage the proper use of these concepts for increased effectiveness in EAP counseling settings.

The role and skills of counselors in EAPs are vital to program success. Counselors are the vital link between the EAP and the treatment community. The training and skills possessed by counselors determine the quality of problem assessment, problem definition, acceptance of referral for treatment, and continuing case management.

Many counselors bring to the EAP counseling setting knowledge and skills used in traditional mental health counseling. While some of these skills and concepts may be effective in traditional counseling settings, they are often ineffective or used differently in the EAP counseling setting.

This handbook is organized in three parts. Part 1 discusses the role and attributes of EAP counselors and gives an overview of the employee assistance field. Part 2 provides EAP case examples. Part 3 details various practice concepts frequently used in the EAP counseling setting. It also explores the similarities and differences of their use in both traditional settings and EAP counseling settings.

This handbook discusses broad practice concepts. For a more detailed discussion of specific techniques, counseling textbooks should be consulted.

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PART 1

ROLE AND ATTRIBUTES
OF COUNSELORS

The role and attributes of counselors are a complex and multifaceted subject. This part of the book explores the various aspects of the counseling profession, from the theoretical foundations to the practical applications. It discusses the ethical standards that guide counselors, the research methods used to evaluate their effectiveness, and the collaborative efforts required to provide the best possible care for clients. The text also addresses the challenges faced by counselors in their professional and personal lives, and offers strategies for overcoming these challenges. The goal is to provide a comprehensive overview of the field, equipping readers with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed as counselors.

Employee assistance programs (EAPs) can offer social workers, psychologists, chemical dependency counselors, and other professionals a new and expanding arena for practice. The goal of EAPs is to reach an employed population with prompt, effective, confidential help with personal problems. Such programs have had a positive impact on employee productivity — for example, absenteeism is reduced, fewer disruptions occur on the job, health benefits cost less, and employee morale improves. Part 1 describes these services and highlights the preparation that professional clinicians must have to become effective EAP counselors.

THE EAP COUNSELOR

The EAP is an accessible, free, confidential resource for any employee in crisis (e.g., an employee whose dependability is destroyed by alcohol, whose spouse is leaving, whose child has run away, or whom creditors are hounding). More often, it offers services to those in no immediate crisis but who nonetheless feel unable to cope with mounting troubles.

A supervisor may refer an employee with deteriorating job performance to the program; an employee or family member may self-refer after hearing publicity about the program; a shop steward may suggest to a fellow union member that help is needed; or the company's medical or personnel department may be aware of a problem beyond its scope of usual intervention.

EAP counselors provide assessment and referral services with follow-up, to ensure that employees receive appropriate assistance. Some programs also provide short-term individual and family counseling. Others provide wellness services — for example, weight control groups, smoking cessation seminars, or physical fitness programs. "Brown bag" lunch-hour discussions on such topics as stress management, divorce, single parenting, and financial planning are also offered by some EAPs.

In addition to the direct service they provide for employees, EAP counselors train supervisors and union officials to recognize troubled behavior among employees. These key personnel are taught techniques for intervention and referral to the EAP professional. Focus on work performance, avoidance of judgmental comments, and care not to usurp the professional diagnostician's role are areas stressed in this training.

Publicity for the program is also handled by the counselor. For instance, brochures and posters are designed and distributed, and articles are written for employee publications. Management consultation is another important service offered to supervisors, who usually welcome the chance for an off-the-record discussion of the best approach to a troubled employee with work performance problems.

Finally, EAP counselors are called on, at times, to work with special employees and their unique needs, such as handicapped persons and those with specific support service needs (e.g., preretirement counseling, day care).

PROGRAM MODELS

Models for EAPs vary widely. The most common are in-house, company, or joint programs; external programs; informal programs; and union-based programs.

In-House, Company, or Joint Company/Union Sponsored Programs

Services are usually available at the workplace and are offered by counselors who are company employees. Programs are generally housed in the medical or personnel departments or occasionally are independent departments directly responsible to top management. In some cases, the EAP office is located near the worksite but not on company property. These programs offer services to all employees and often to family members as well.

External Programs

Counselors are community based, working either as private consultants or staff members of social service agencies. Contracts are negotiated with employers and payment is either on a fee-for-service or flat-rate, yearly retainer basis, the determinant usually being the number of employees who are potential clients of the program.

The external model is ordinarily used in businesses with fewer than 2,000 employees. One counselor can serve several small businesses.

Informal Programs

EAP services are sometimes offered on a part-time basis through workers who perform other duties within the company, usually personnel, medical, or industrial relations functions. For instance, occupational physicians and occupational health nurses often offer EAP services on a part-time basis, in addition to fulfilling their other duties in the medical department. Recovering alcoholics sometimes are allowed time off from regular duties to assist alcoholic employees to enter Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and treatment programs.

Caution is a necessity when designing a program with the expectation that the EAP counselor will perform other duties. None of these assignments should conflict with the EAP function. For example, a worker would not be encouraged to confide in a counselor who, in his or her capacity as a personnel or industrial relations specialist, might be expected to use confidential information about the employee to suspend, fire, or fail to promote him.

Union-Based Programs

Counselors housed in union halls offer services to union members, who are often employees of different firms. Sometimes unions pool resources to hire EAP counselors for several local unions in a given area.

THE COUNSELING PROFESSIONAL IN THE WORKPLACE

Counselors are attracted to the EAP field for varied reasons. As funding for public agencies shrinks, the private sector is viewed as a growing source of jobs for those with the required skills. Salaries are higher; employee assistance counselors usually earn more than counselors in traditional mental health agencies and health settings. The ceiling for salary is limited only by the amount the professional can negotiate. It is unlike the narrow range allotted to counselors in more traditional settings where budgets, determined by public funding and private fund raising, are severely limited.

The EAP setting allows for a more varied work pattern. The counselor does clinical work with employees and their families and performs other duties as well. He or she consults with managers on service for troubled employees, discusses with union officials treatment approaches for troubled union members, runs training seminars of promotional and educational value, and performs administrative functions, such as budget preparation, research on clinical and administrative issues, and policy development.

Because the field is relatively new and is popular in the professional and business communities, the EAP counselor is often invited to speak to community groups and at professional meetings. Counselors in the field also enjoy increased control over their working conditions and hours.

There are, of course, disadvantages to EAP work. Jobs are less secure than those in the traditional social service settings. A business downturn or change in management could result in the cancellation of an EAP contract or program reductions. Vacations are shorter; two weeks annually is typical in the business community. Dress codes are more restrictive, with a resultant increase in personal spending for clothes and a loss of informality.

The in-house EAP counselor is in a high-profile position; the program is under scrutiny, and the counselor's conduct

must be above reproach. Friendships with fellow workers are limited because all employees are potential clients of the program. In addition, the counselor in a business setting usually works without peer support and without direct clinical supervision.

AREAS OF SPECIALIZED KNOWLEDGE/SKILL

Counselors entering the EAP field must have expertise in a number of areas, as discussed in the following paragraphs.

Mental Health

A broad mental health background is essential. Two elements are crucial: The counselor must be an expert diagnostician and must be able to identify the most effective community resources for the company's employees.

Excellent diagnostic skills are the key. The traditional psychosocial assessment is the backbone of EAP services. In the field, social workers, psychologists, and those with similar training have an advantage over other aspirants. These professionals are trained through course work and prior experience to assess the client in light of all relevant factors, including mental and physical health, social relations, and cultural and economic background. They may not, however, be skilled in completing the diagnostic process quickly.

In the work setting, a counselor seldom has the luxury of several sessions, when diagnosis can shade into treatment. One or two sessions are typical, followed by referral to another resource.

A poor diagnosis can hinder needed service to the employee or generate the wrong kind of service. The mistake often results in prolonged suffering for the employee and increased costs to the employer.

An EAP counselor must be able to distinguish a psychosis from a drug reaction, a depression from alcoholism, or

a character disorder from an acute adjustment reaction. Those with experience in crisis intervention and community mental health seem especially well suited for EAP work.

Referral to community resources, with sufficient follow-up to ensure that the client receives good service and is recovering, is the counterpart to accurate diagnosis. The counselor must be accustomed not only to direct counseling of individuals, groups, and families, but also must have training in resource development.

Counselors with experience in numerous social service organizations and with knowledge of community resources are better prepared for EAP work than those with concentrations in psychotherapy. In the EAP setting, assessment and referral are the typical modes of service, rather than ongoing therapy or provision of service on-site. Therefore, making referrals is invaluable.

Specialized professionals, such as chemical dependency counselors, should take courses in psychology and social work at the graduate level in order to prepare themselves for the broad range of problems encountered in EAP work. Work experience in a mental health setting is also important.

Chemical Dependency

Training and experience in alcoholism and drug dependency are essential for the counselor in an occupational setting. It is difficult to imagine that a counselor could function effectively in this field without at least a year of work experience in a chemical dependency treatment center; many hours of attendance at open AA, Narcotics Anonymous, and Al-Anon meetings; and an attitude of openness and gratitude toward recovering persons willing to share their expertise.

Social workers and psychologists generally assume that training in mental health brings with it the ability to work with the chemically dependent client. Unfortunately, such training seldom highlights specific knowledge about the disease of