

Kathleen Cramm on Work Addiction, Rob Peters on EAP Counseling

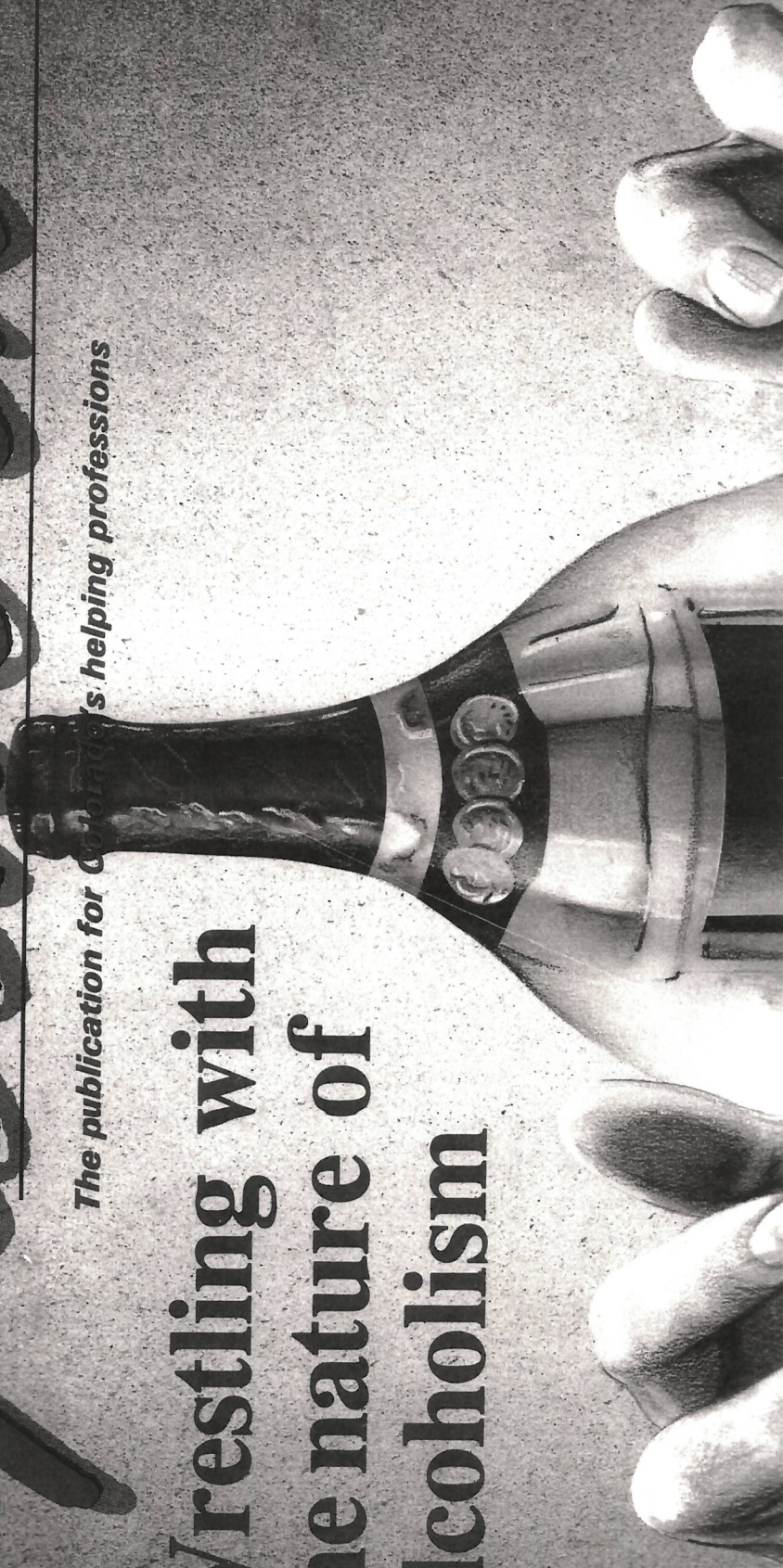
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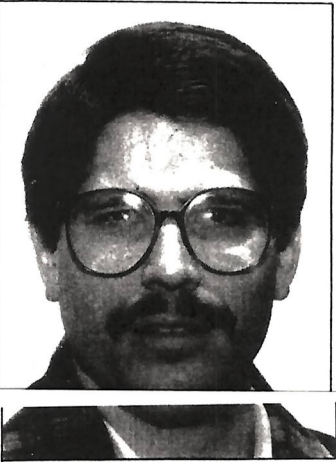
**Wrestling with
the nature of
alcoholism**



PERSPECTIVES

Assessment, counseling for EAPs

by Robert J. Peters, LCSW, CEAP



"Employees come to the EAP with a variety of problems."

Traditionally, Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) have helped employees address personal problems that impact their job performance. This includes relationship difficulties, child care issues, alcohol and substance abuse, death of a loved one, divorce, parenting issues, marriage and re-marriage, the birth of a child, experiencing trauma, low self-esteem, depression and anxiety, financial and legal problems, caring for elderly parents, and the host of problems we confront in our modern society.

Employees typically access services through either self-referral or a supervisory referral process (to address a job performance issue). After the employee has made contact with the EAP, problem assessment is one of the first phases of service provision.

Assessment is one of the core technologies for a quality EAP. Employees come to the EAP with a variety of different problems; a thorough assessment provides the basis for matching the employee with community resources that address the

problem situation.

Not unlike an explorer on an archeological expedition, a thorough assessment often involves the uncovering of relevant bits of information. The goal of assessment is to discover a mutually agreeable basis for assistance which is guided by the professional competence and the values of the EAP professional.

The role of the EAP professional is to identify and arrange the pieces of evidence into an identifiable pattern that can then be addressed. Often the information is provided in pieces and chunks, which necessitates the use of a framework for arranging relevant data. One such framework includes the following considerations: current issues, relevant historical data and logistical concerns.

Current issues are often assessed from the employee's perspective. This includes the employee's stated presenting problem; why the employee is seeking assistance at this time; the immediate historical context to the issue (people, places and events); the employee's current attempt to resolve the situation (if any); the length of time the employee has experienced the problem; the employee's support network (family, friends, co-workers, etc.); and the employee's strengths, skills and coping mechanisms.

When an employee is referred by a supervisor, it is important to obtain this

information from the supervisor's perspective. Conferring with significant others may also be part of the process.

Relevant historical data is gathered to round out the picture the employee presents. Information gathered may include the following: similar problems; how those problems were addressed or not addressed; experiences in counseling or resource utilization; chemical use, abuse and addiction (in this context, "chemical" refers to illicit drugs, alcohol, prescription drugs, caffeine and nicotine); other abuse, including physical, emotional, social and spiritual abuse; mental illness and chemical use, abuse and addiction in the previous two/three generations of the extended family (siblings, parents, cousins, aunts and uncles, grandparents, etc.); and medical problems that may be relevant.

Logistical issues are important to consider when making a match between the employee and treatment resources available in the community. These issues include residential and work locations, financial resources, specific issue (e.g. choosing a female therapist to work with the female incest survivor), employee preferences (e.g. requests regarding religious affiliation, gender, race and age), and benefit plan coverage. Exploring the employee's preferences often leads to more information that can be valuable.

Often a constellation of problems is presented, requiring a thorough assessment to identify the existence of an underlying issue central to the presented problems.

For example, one employee was referred by her supervisor for being chronically absent on Mondays, taking extended lunches, making inappropriate remarks to customers and not completing work assignments on time. She complained about financial problems, relationship difficulties and problems with her co-workers. Upon further examination, alcohol addiction was assessed to be her core problem. When addressed by referral to an intensive outpatient treatment program, it was possible for her to address her other problems.

Assessment as intervention

As with any human interaction, empathic listening to establish rapport is crucial to the entire process. Sharing the assessment with the employee is important for involving the him in his own problem resolution. Providing a structure to the morass of problems that the employee experiences can greatly reduce anxiety and offer hope that help is available. Defining the problem conveys the fact that others have experienced this problem and have gone on to live happy and productive lives.

When appropriate, normalizing the

employee's response to a crazy situation (as in a trauma reaction) is a major step toward resolution. Sometimes information sharing alone is the intervention that mobilizes the client to access the resources to address the problem. Conveying a sense of realistic hope to the employee that help is available can be very empowering. And knowing they have a supportive resource available to them at the EAP may be sufficient as the first step in addressing the problem.

However, caution must be exercised during the assessment phase to avoid a Pollyanna-like sense of optimism that EAP contact alone will resolve a difficult problem. This is tantamount to using a band-aid for an injury that might require surgery.

Crisis intervention

Often an employee will call when in crisis. This requires particular skills in offering assistance, support and guidance.

EAPs often provide crisis intervention services that help stabilize an employee and prepare for ongoing assistance when appropriate. A crisis, by definition lasts approximately six to eight weeks. It is within this context that EAPs began offering short-term counseling to employees who utilize the services of the EAP.

Short-term treatment

Short-term treatment, unlike crisis intervention, aims to increase the individual's pre-crisis learning skills and rather than simply restore the pre-crisis equilibrium. It involves specific personal and behavioral change methods with the objective of bringing about positive changes in the client's current life. This problem-centered orientation focuses on the here and now.

One such model offers the employee eight sessions, usually provided over the course of eight weeks. The professional's activities are directed toward the following:

1. Making the problem-goal definitions as clear as possible through the establishment of a contract with objective, identifiable goals.

2. Supporting the client in systematic problem-solving in which selected change strategies are utilized and which concludes with an evaluative termination interview.

3. Using the pressures of an explicit time line as a key factor toward changes. Often tasks and homework are assigned for completion between sessions to address specific skill building areas.

The focus of the therapeutic intervention is designed to directly respond to the immediate requests of the client.

continued on page 24

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ASSESSMENT

continued from page 22

When other areas of difficulty emerge, they are noted but not directly addressed unless progress on the original contract is obstructed. (As in the previous example of the woman who was referred by her supervisor and who was alcoholic.) Then the contract is either renegotiated or a referral to an external resource is made.

Additionally, the professional demonstrates a willingness to terminate work with the client at the projected ending point rather than looking for reasons to continue treatment.

Sample problems appropriate for utilizing this model include the following, which occur both on and off the job: interpersonal conflict, dissatisfaction with social relations, difficulties in role performance, reactive emotional distress, problems of work and social transition, problems with formal organizations, including job site, and inadequate resources.

Enhancing social skills, long a focus of workshops provided by EAPs, may also be appropriate for short-term treatment. Some possibilities include assertiveness training, stress management, problem solving, conflict management, relationship skill building and communication skills.

Intervention strategies utilized by the professional include role playing, behavior enactment, modeling and practice, educational informational strategies, normalizing and skill building, socializing, facilitation, redefining and relabeling.

If additional assistance is appropriate at the end of the eighth session, referral to a community resource is indicated. The transition to the resources can be facilitated utilizing the relationship established during the short-term work.

Again, caution must be exercised and discretion used when negotiating a contract with the client for services. If the client's problems cannot be served within the short-term treatment format, then referral to a community resource is most appropriate for the best interests of the employee.

Skills necessary to offer short-term treatment within an EAP setting can be acquired through a master's degree training program that specializes in industrial social work or psychology.

EAP definition

Representatives in the national EAP community will maintain that short-term treatment is not a service provided by EAPs. In fact, recent legislation in California and other states limits the number and purpose of sessions provided by an EAP to strict assessment and referral.

Regardless of how EAP is defined, intervention begins as the moment of

contact between the EAP professional and the employee as they seek support when addressing problems. Both sides on this issue agree that the employee's needs at the time take first priority. Disagreement occurs regarding how the employee's needs are defined and can best be served. When marketing an EAP to a company, it is very important to describe the services provided, including short-term treatment if appropriate. □