Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) developed out of the field of “occupational social work.” Beginning in the mid-1960s, occupational social workers helped employees with substance abuse issues, particularly alcoholism, in the workplace. As organizations began to realize that there were many other factors besides substance abuse that affected job performance, safety, and absenteeism rates, the field of occupational social work expanded to include counseling and information on many other issues, and eventually came to be known as EAP (Akabas, 2008; Pace, 2006).

An employee assistance program (EAP) is an employee-paid benefit that helps employees address any personal or professional concerns that may affect their work performance and attendance negatively. Some large organizations employ or contract with EAP counselors who work onsite, while others provide employees with access to EAP counselors offsite through EAP provider network programs.

EAP counseling is short-term. Many employees who utilize EAP services are referred by their employer, and may even be mandated to obtain EAP services. The goal of EAP interventions is to identify the problem, resolve the issue during the approved number of sessions, help the employee problem-solve, or provide the employee with referrals and other resources to address the problem. Employees are typically approved for three to six sessions with the EAP counselor. The number of approved sessions varies, based on the workplace benefit. Some employers may offer more sessions, or even, an unlimited number of sessions. Since EAP counseling is for a limited number of sessions, the sessions are typically more directive, and resources and referrals are often provided. EAP counselors may also provide crisis counseling, including suicidal risk assessments, substance abuse assessments, critical incident stress debriefings, and support groups.

Problems Addressed by EAPs
Typically, employees who are referred by management for poor attendance and/or work performance issues need assistance uncovering the underlying problems that may...
be affecting their work. These problems could include stress, financial worries, parenting issues, relationship issues, substance abuse issues, and grief, or mental health issues. Employees can also access EAP services voluntarily to receive help with personal difficulties ranging from domestic violence and depression, to caregiver burnout and eating disorders. Many employers also offer EAP services to employees’ family members.

In addition to addressing employee issues directly, onsite EAP counselors often consult with management, labor and Employee Relations (LERs) staff, and union staff about how to manage difficult employees, enhance the workplace environment, and address other factors involving work-life balance.

EAP counselors can also provide workplace educational trainings and lunchtime workshops for employees on various topics, such as stress management, depression, anxiety, organization, and time management. EAP counselors may also be asked to develop specific workshops based on issues that might be occurring in that particular workplace (e.g., layoffs, employee death).

Organizational Culture

When working onsite as an EAP counselor, it is always important to be aware of the organization’s culture. EAP professionals also should be comfortable interacting with all organizational levels from management, to entry-level. Many onsite EAP positions are located within large organizations, businesses, and corporate settings. These settings can be much more conservative, in terms of attire and appearance than traditional non-profit settings. For instance, business casual, if not traditional business attire is often required. Of course, these expectations can vary according to the setting. There may be different expectations for an EAP counselor working in a hospital, compared to an EAP counselor working for a corporation.

EAP Settings

Onsite EAP providers work at the physical location of the organization where they provide services, sometimes as part of Human Resources, or a Work-Life program. The EAP provider may be an employee of the organization, an independent contractor, or a subcontractor (employed by an EAP network provider). Many federal government agencies employ EAP providers, and/or hire contractors to provide the services.

EAP providers who work onsite are typically private practitioners on an EAP provider network panel, where they agree to provide EAP services in an outpatient setting. Much like being on a health insurance panel, the providers agree to provide a limited number of sessions, and agree to a reimbursement rate for the services.

Some EAP providers work in call centers, where all services are provided telephonically. Call centers are staffed 24 hours a day by Master’s level clinicians. Providers that work in call centers typically provide screening intakes, crisis counseling, assessments, management consultations, and resources and referrals. Referrals may include connecting the caller with mental health professionals for diagnosis and treatment or outpatient treatment. Depending on the plan the employer chooses, resources may include child care listings, health and wellness information, or legal and financial resources. Some EAP network providers offer phone counseling, although the licensing regulations about providing counseling by phone vary from state to state.

Getting Started in EAP

Since EAP providers work with such a wide range of issues, EAP professionals should be well-rounded, and have clinical experience, including conducting mental status exams, and diagnosing and treating mental health disorders. Since a license to practice independently is required to perform EAP work, many social workers already have the knowledge, experience, and credentials they need to provide EAP services.

Requirements

No specific certification is required to perform EAP work in most states, however, it can be very helpful to have experience and training in substance abuse assessment, grief and bereavement, Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM), as well as experience with public speaking and providing trainings. It is also important to obtain EAP-specific training on best practices for the EAP industry, as working with organizations and in corporate environments may be a new experience for some social workers. Training on dual-relationships and maintaining confidentiality are also essential as EAP professionals have to work not only with their employee clients, but also collaborate with management, unions, and LERS professionals (Akabas, 2008).

Conclusion

EAP work may be a good professional fit for you if you are a seasoned, clinical social worker, experienced in providing therapy, presenting workshops on mental health topics, and you enjoy working with a wide range of issues on a short-term basis. EAP work can be a great addition to private practice work, or an option for social workers who would prefer to work onsite in a professional setting, with no fieldwork or travel involved.
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References


Resources

EAPrefer is an EAP provider network for NASW members. www.eaprefer.org

Employee Assistance Professionals Association www.eapassn.org


NASW Code of Ethics. Available online. socialworkers.org/pubs/code/default.asp

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Employee Assistance Programs: Social Work at “Work”

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