

The EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM For Teachers

A PROGRAM OVERVIEW

by Kathy Burford

At some time, each of us may have been faced with a life situation that we found difficult to resolve. It could have been related to a family or marriage issue, a workplace or personal stressor, or a financial pressure that caused increased worry or concern. Most of the time, we are able to tackle the problem and find a solution to these or similar problems. At other times, it seems as if no clear solution is in sight and we end up feeling stuck, frustrated or perhaps stressed out. It is at times like this, that teachers can turn to their Employee Assistance Program for help.

The Employee Assistance Program, or EAP as it is typically known, is a service designed to assist teachers experiencing either job-related or personal difficulties that could affect job performance, general health or well-being. The aim of the program, when it was put in place almost eight years ago, was to provide confidential help or assistance to the teacher at the earliest point in time before problems became more serious. More recently, the EAP has been involved in proactive activities to support the general health and well-being of teachers.

Background and Rationale of the EAP

The EAP was initiated by teachers for teachers as the result of a resolution put forward at the NLTA AGM in 1982. Further development resulted through the establishment and joint efforts of a committee comprised of individuals representing the NLTA, Government, and the School Boards Association. It was recognized that such a program could benefit not only teachers, but the employer as well. For the teacher, maintaining or regaining a sense of well-being was seen as a pre-requisite to being able to function well in the classroom and carrying out the objectives of the education system. It was also recognized that well-functioning teaching staff provide the best educational services and this directly benefits students.

When the EAP came on stream in 1989, it was established as a negotiated benefit under Article 55 of the Teachers' Collective Agreement. At that time, an EAP coordinator was hired to implement the program. In the spring of 1995, after the latest round of bargaining, a second EAP coordinator was hired. At that time the program was also expanded to include a wellness component. The wellness component was to include the design and development of proactive health promotion materials and activities designed to assist teachers before problems arose.

What EAP services are available?

The services offered through the EAP include two components. The first is intervention which begins when the teacher contacts the EAP with a problem or difficulty, and includes: problem identification, assessment, and a referral for counselling and follow-up. The second is a wellness component which helps teachers in developing positive coping strategies to deal with problems more effectively, and to increase an overall sense of well-being during difficult times of personal and professional change and transition. Flyers, workbooks and workshops are available to teachers, schools and school boards and cover a wide range of topics.

What kinds of problem issues does the EAP deal with?

The program is "broad brush" which means it covers a broad range of issues such as marital and family relationships, work and personal stress, financial difficulties, abuse, health issues, emotional and mental health, and addictions. It is recognized that these are private matters, and as a result, a teacher's contact with the program is kept confidential and the school or board is not made aware of their voluntary involvement in the program if the teacher enters the EAP on their own initiative.

In a small percentage of contacts, the work performance of the teacher may have declined to the point that the school board may initiate a mandatory (non-voluntary) referral of the teacher to the program. If that were the case, a teacher's involvement in the program would be acknowledged to the board, but no other details about the nature of the problem would be supplied without the teacher's written consent to do so.

What about the costs?

There are no costs to the teacher in seeking help, information or assistance from an EAP coordinator. There are also no costs involved if an EAP coordinator were to be asked to facilitate a workshop for a group of teachers or for a branch or

school professional development day. If a referral was arranged for a teacher to see a professional counsellor, there would be costs involved to cover private counselling or travel expenses. If such a referral is provided, there is some financial assistance available through the Membership Assistance Fund to help with costs for counselling, which can on average be approximately \$60.00 per hour. The total amount of assistance available is a \$1,000.00 lifetime limit which will cover 50% of the counselling costs to a maximum of \$30.00 per hour. Assistance towards the costs of travel to counselling sessions is provided at 5.6¢/km. The NLTA group insurance may also cover some additional expenses. In some cases, an individual family member other than the teacher may require counselling. For example, this might be a child or a spouse. Financial assistance is not available under the guidelines of the program if the teacher was not directly involved in the counselling sessions. Any active teacher, full time, replacement or substitute, can contact the program to obtain confidential help at the earliest possible moment.

How do teachers access the EAP?

Normally the first contact is made through a phone call to make an appointment to see an EAP coordinator. If a face-to-face meeting is not possible, a telephone call to the EAP coordinator can start the process. The purpose of the initial contact is to identify the issues and suggest an effective approach to resolving them. Also, there may be a request for information, educational material, a presentation or workshop. A telephone call to the EAP coordinator can determine the level and type of assistance required.

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