



EAP ... What Does That Have To Do With Me?

by CLAUDETTE E. S. COOMBS

Everything! The Employee Assistance Program belongs to you. The **Wellness** and **Counselling** Programs are the two primary divisions of EAP services. They encompass any programs, initiatives or strategies which assist teachers in attaining, maintaining or enhancing their optimal health status.

We recognize that optimal health, or well-being, is achieved through a combination of personal and environmental factors. Some things we direct, like our lifestyles and choices. Even though our genetic complement and other external factors such as the weather and amount of sunshine are beyond our command, we can choose our response to them. However, there are many other external factors which we can either control or influence. We need to be aware of each of those factors, then manipulate our environment to ensure a positive impact on our lives. It is those controllable and malleable factors which the EAP attempts to influence.

Wellness

The **Wellness Program** is designed to actively enhance the well-being of teachers. This proactive approach is used in many ways including: facilitating the development and support of individual health strategies; offering comprehensive skills training sessions to groups of teachers; assisting individual schools, NLTA Branches and School Boards in developing and implementing wellness programs and strategies; and, working within the educational system to link with all areas where teacher wellness is impacted. Respectful Workplace Programs, School Development Plans, Climate and Culture Committees, Safe and Caring Schools initiatives, Occupational Health and Safety Teams and, School Health Committees all have a connection to the EAP Wellness Program. The EAP Coordinators work with teachers, administrators, Board Office staff, community health resources, and service providers to ensure that the teacher wellness agenda is on everyone's radar. Coordinators also offer comments and sug-

gestions to NLTA staff when they are carrying out their work with, and for, teachers. Examples include information concerning: leave and working conditions to the Negotiating Committee staff; specific stressors and their impact to the BES staff in preparation for the New Teacher, School Representative, Pre-Retirement and Financial Wellness presentations. The EAP Wellness Program enthusiastically delivers its messages, each year reaching approximately 1000 teachers through workshops and thousands of others through print resources.

Counselling

Most teachers are familiar with the **Counselling Program**. The ultimate goal of the EAP Counselling program is to reach teachers before issues negatively affect their overall health. Unfortunately however, teachers usually contact the EAP Coordinators only after issues have caused some significant complication in their lives. The EAP Counselling Program can be accessed for any reason which is causing emotional distress or internal conflict due to the effects of various stressors. Although we all go through challenges, the impact on us can vary dramatically from one person to another and from one issue to another. When we know that the effects are spilling over to our personal serenity, relationships and maybe even our workplace functioning, then it is definitely time to connect with EAP! Since 1989 more than 2700 teachers have used this component of EAP. Most contacts are made directly by the teacher; however, there are occasions when a concerned spouse, teacher friend, administrator or even Board Staff person will call to ask what they can do to help an anonymous colleague. Support and information are provided to the caller and s/he is told to encourage the teacher to make contact. A teacher will *not* be contacted just because a friend is concerned. The teacher must indicate a desire to be involved with the EAP before Coordinators can offer direct assistance. Unlike some other workplace EAPs, the EAP for Teachers only

offers services to current teachers. This means that retired teachers and family members are not eligible for support.

Why Do Teachers Know So Little About EAP Services?

Daily we are bombarded with visual and auditory stimuli. Teaching is one of the professions where this is especially true. We constantly make decisions, conscious or otherwise, about which things legitimately require our attention or action. On a busy day, in the midst of a busy week, surrounded by a busy month, we decide that reading all the way through a magazine or checking an informational website is not at the top of our priority list. Often we tend to pay attention to the things that are relevant to us – *right now!* That could mean that, despite its history and regular promotion, many teachers are unaware of the realm of services offered through the Employee Assistance Program for Teachers.

The History

The concept of developing an EAP for Teachers began in 1984 because the NTA believed that providing support to teachers would help them with their jobs and in their lives. Seeing a need, they began the planning. The Program was initially administered by the NTA until the Department of Education and the 'School Board Trustees' joined as official supporters in 1986 and eventually full partners when the NTA, School Trustees' Association and the Provincial Government signed a Collective Agreement which included an EAP policy and program. By 1988, demands for EAP counselling services were growing and a coordinator was hired in 1989 to manage the Program and coordinate the counselling services. With continued growth and a new emphasis on wellness, in 1995 the partners decided that the Program needed a wellness component and a second EAP Coordinator was hired to introduce a proactive Wellness Program to EAP. Over time, Program funding has changed from being the sole responsibility of the NTA to having salaries and most direct Program expenses funded by Government, while the Centennial Fund covers counselling-related expenses. The program is administered by and housed at the NLTA building in St. John's.

Current Program Status

Achievements and ongoing activities since the Program's ratification by NTA members at the 1984 AGM include: further development of the Counselling Program; the evolution and directed development of the Wellness Program; production

of Wellness promotion print materials; workshops tailored to the needs of specific teacher groups; the inclusion of a Wellness article in every issue of *The Bulletin*; consultation with, and education of, Administrators and Board personnel on addressing teacher issues from a wellness perspective; information for NLTA staff and officials on wellness related items to be considered in contract negotiations or presented in their teacher sessions; expanding the Teacher Wellness agenda to other school and health groups; formalization of EAP program components and policies; expansion of the working relationships with school, NLTA and Board office staff, and surveys to determine teacher wellness needs and interests.

Future Ideas

Amid the regular demands of the Program, Coordinators are setting aside time to review the efficiency of resource use and the effectiveness of current strategies. We are looking at creative ways of expanding Program capacity to meet the wellness needs of teachers, for both the needs we know and those we anticipate.

If you are interested in seeking personal assistance to get your life moving in the direction you want, don't delay. Contact your EAP Coordinators to start the confidential process. If you are interested in having your school or group of teachers embark on a journey to wellness together, contact your EAP Coordinators today! We can help with the design, planning, implementation and ongoing support of your strategy and initiatives.

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