

Increasingly organisations are investing in talking therapies to reduce psychological ill health and sickness absence and improve staff wellbeing at work. It has been estimated that over 10 million employees in the UK now have support from an EAP for personal or work-related problems.¹

Many counsellors cultivate a portfolio career as specialists in the workplace wellbeing field, undertaking EAP work as well as providing other workplace services such as trauma interventions, training, coaching and mediation. Counsellors in private practice may see clients who come to them via EAPs and this can be a welcome source of regular referrals.

Generally, EAPs have a minimum set of requirements before taking on affiliate counsellors. Typically these might include accreditation by BACP or an equivalent professional body, a number of years' post-qualifying experience and professional indemnity insurance.² But, beyond that, entering the health and wellbeing workplace field as a counsellor can be challenging as the industry has particular standards and expectations that do not apply in private practice. Newly qualified counsellors may not be trained in working 'organisationally' and may not be aware of the inherent tensions in EAP work. There are significant risks and challenges in the meeting of two worlds and cultures that the counsellor must negotiate: therapy and business.

This article will explore what it means to be a workplace counsellor and what EAPs expect from their affiliate counsellors, interwoven with some reflections from counsellors on their experience of EAP work.

What is workplace counselling?

While the counselling may take place in one's own therapy room, EAP work is set in the context of the client's workplace and so it's also known as

'workplace counselling'. The Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA) represents the concerns of professionals and organisations involved in employee assistance. In their recently published *EAP Guidelines*, they outline what is required: 'Workplace counsellors are expected to have an understanding of organisational cultures and workplace factors that might impact on the psychological health of people at work. Furthermore, workplace counsellors should be mindful of the different stakeholders involved and be aware of potential conflict between the needs of the client, the organisation, the counselling provision and other relevant parties.'³

Counsellors trained to focus solely on the therapeutic needs of the client may find this an alien concept. This is being addressed by BACP Workplace, the division concerned with the psychological and emotional aspects of health at work. Jean Crispin, Chair of BACP Workplace, has written of their plans to develop workplace counselling as a professional specialism and to address the key question: 'What does a counsellor need in addition to basic training in order to operate in a workplace context?'³

Three-cornered contract

The client's employer funds the EAP work so there is always an organisational context to the counselling relationship. The fundamental difference between workplace counselling and general counselling is that 'whenever you see a client – there is one other "person" present – the organisation'.⁴ This can be difficult to grasp but 'knowing how to balance the three-cornered contract between the workplace counsellor, the client and the organisation is a vital skill which becomes even more complex if you factor in the organisation which commissions the counselling, such as an EAP'.⁵

EAP case managers should always highlight policies about disclosures to their counsellors when they contract to work with them. This should also form part of the counsellor's contract with their client. Andrew Kinder, Chair of UK EAPA, explains a typical situation that could arise in EAP work and the counsellor's responsibility: 'If a client is at risk from a health and safety point of view at work – for example, if they were drinking heavily and operating machinery – and if they informed their counsellor of this, then the counsellor would have a contractual responsibility to inform the EAP.'

Areas that potentially cause the greatest concern relate to producing reports or information for management, boundaries between management referrals and self-referrals, and organisational policies – eg alcohol and drug misuse in safety-critical industries.⁴

Counsellors need to think organisationally to be able to balance the needs of the client, the organisation and the EAP. Clients often bring work-related issues such as stress, organisational change, overload at work and bullying and harassment. These issues, along with poor management, restructuring or redundancies, can evoke feelings of fear and insecurity for our clients. But it is important that the counsellor remains impartial, warns Andrew Kinder: 'The counsellor needs to be neutral to ensure that they do not collude with the client. The counsellor is not there to reinforce that the organisation is this terrible big bad wolf. What you need to do is hold both the client and the organisation.'

Manager referrals

Organisations often turn to the EAP for staff counselling to help with problems such as reducing sickness absence or work-related stress. A manager may refer for counselling a member of their team who is off sick with stress. In this case, the EAP case manager (whose role it is

Talking business

Nicola Banning explores what it means to be a workplace counsellor and what employee assistance programmes expect from their counsellors

Illustration by David McMillan



to facilitate communication between the counsellor and the client's organisation) may be looking for feedback from the counsellor: for example, is the client attending the sessions? The client's manager might also want to know if there is something they can do to help the client and may make this request via the EAP case manager. Counsellors need to negotiate this and be aware of their contract with the EAP, says Andrew Kinder: 'This can be a particularly complex area if the client is feeling under pressure or harassed by their employer/manager, and serves to highlight the need for skilful supervision that is sensitive to the nature of organisational work.'

Supervision

Dr Noreen Tehrani is a specialist in workplace health, with extensive experience in the public and private sectors and a supervisor for individuals and organisations. Aware of the particular demands of EAP work, she offers the following advice to counsellors: 'When I look for a supervisor for my own work in organisations I tend to interview them and present them with a number of ethical dilemmas which relate to working in organisations. It is surprising how few supervisors are prepared to give direction or guidance in dealing with the conflicts of interest and boundary issues that arise when dealing with a contract that may involve a client, the client's organisation and the EAP.'

She suggests asking potential supervisors questions such as:

- what dilemmas have you faced in working in organisations and how did you solve them?
- what are the major differences between working with private clients and organisational clients?
- describe an ethical issue you dealt with in an organisational counselling session and how you handled it.
- what experience do you have of working with systems or with systems theories?

- if I faced a major ethical or moral issue with the EAP, organisation or client, what services/support could you provide?
- what do you think are the important features of a good EAP counselling supervisor?

Theoretical approach

EAPs are open to all staff across an organisation, so referrals for counselling are likely to come from a wide range of social backgrounds. Many are unlikely to access or pay for private therapy. This can be both a challenge and an advantage, as one counsellor explains: 'I've heard a lot of counsellors say that through EAP work they have seen clients they would never have worked with otherwise in private practice and so counselling becomes more "normal" and more people get to experience therapy.'

Some of the challenges faced by newly trained counsellors in the workplace sector were highlighted by Amanda Smith, Clinical Director of Amian EAP, in a recent article in *Counselling at Work*. She explained: 'Counsellors leaving training programmes with often a single theoretical orientation may sometimes struggle with the often complex issues that arise within workplace counselling.'⁶

From an EAP point of view, 'solution-focused/CBT' tend to be the ones that suit the workplace and the notion of "work" between sessions fits an organisational culture well,' says Andrew Kinder. Yet he acknowledges this is not always the case: 'In cases of bereavement then this would be entirely inappropriate and the focus would be more person-centred.' Many EAPs do not specify a theoretical approach but have an expectation that, whatever the approach, counsellors can work within a tight time scale.

EAP counselling is usually short-term (four to eight sessions). This means that counsellors need to develop relationships quickly and be focused in their work. Sharon McCormick, Chief Executive of The Listening Centre, a regional EAP

based in the Midlands, says counsellors have to be realistic: 'Many times I come across therapists who really struggle to work within the limitation of six sessions but unfortunately in this setting it's a "given". No employer has a blank cheque book and nor should we expect them to have one, especially in the current economic climate.'

Some counsellors worry that EAP work is 'no more than a sticking plaster' that leaves long-term issues unresolved. Realistically, six sessions may not be enough to work on long-term issues but it can be a powerful introduction to the process of therapy. It's unlikely that a client will resolve a complex issue, such as a long history of domestic abuse. However, it's important to hold onto what is possible. Short-term work can be crucial in helping the client to see that their concerns about the abuse are real and that change is possible, and to provide signposting when the counselling ends. As one counsellor points out: 'In my private practice I don't work in a time-limited way, but when I work with EAPs I have to. It never ceases to amaze me what can happen in a small number of sessions. That's a good lesson for me.'

Appearances matter

Some EAPs carry out checks on counsellors' premises to ensure that therapy rooms are professional and up to standard. 'In very simple terms, we try to put ourselves in our client's shoes and imagine what it would be like for a client, who has never had counselling before, to arrive to have the counselling sessions that we arranged for them.'⁷ Access to the building, directions, car parking, waiting rooms and toilet facilities are all on the checklist.

Writing in *Counselling at Work*, Sue Middleton, Affiliate Manager at Right Management Workplace Wellness, says that complaints from clients about counsellors and the suitability of their premises do occur: 'We have had clients

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complain that they were required to remove their shoes when visiting a counsellor, or whose sessions were interrupted by family dogs and cats wandering in and out of the room.⁷²

Sharon McCormick describes her experience of visiting the premises of potential counsellor affiliates: 'Sadly, I have come across totally inappropriate settings which were instrumental in deciding not to pursue the affiliation further. Some examples are poor standards of cleanliness, pets being able to roam free, personal possessions displayed in the room and lack of privacy from public view.'

Generally, EAPs expect a neutral and professional room. In a newsletter for its affiliate counsellors on its expectations of their premises, Right Management Workplace Wellness also specifies: 'No overly personal displays (particularly family photos), no indication of religious, sexual, political, beliefs and no crystals, aromas or alternative therapy suggestions.'⁷⁷

Identity is communicated in many ways, including through our appearance and how we dress. This may be integral to who we are and to how a counsellor works in their private practice. However, EAP counselling needs to reflect the workplace context. Dress code matters, says Andrew Kinder: 'Employees may be coming in work time and so the counsellor needs to be aware of that. I think the work requires professional dress and you need to consider the organisation in which the client works. It's smart casual and definitely not casual dress.'

Pay rates and contracts

Concerns about the rates paid for sessions often emerge during conversations with counsellors about EAP work. Andrew Kinder acknowledges the potential for misunderstanding between EAPs and affiliate counsellors. 'Counsellors may feel that fees paid for sessions are too low, given CPD and training costs.'⁷⁵

He warns that pay rates look likely to continue to be an issue. 'When I compare the price of an EAP per capita rate 10 years ago to now, it has probably halved. There are many reasons for this, especially as buyers have started to commoditise the service and some are even expecting a free EAP when bundled with other services, such as health insurance.' He believes this downward pressure on costs is unlikely to ease: 'Workplace counselling is still a very important part of an EAP so will continue to be offered in the future. However, it is probably the most expensive part (especially face to face) so cost pressures will likely continue.'⁷⁵

EAP work is, by definition, short-term, contractual and without guarantees of future work, reflecting the bigger picture of how working lives are changing.^{8,9} One experienced practitioner described a fulfilling working relationship she developed over time with one EAP case manager where she felt the therapeutic work was valued. However, when the EAP work came to an abrupt end for business reasons, the therapist was left with both a sense of disappointment and dispensability. 'There was no "goodbye". No "thank you". That was it. My services were dispensed with.' As therapists, we know about managing endings and clearly this was an unsatisfactory one. But it also serves to highlight our enormous potential as educators in the workplace sector and why it is that so many practitioners are committed to taking what we know from therapy into organisational life.

Undoubtedly, workplace counselling and EAP work require the negotiation of multiple relationships that may not fit comfortably with some counsellors' models or approaches to therapy. My hope is that this article will encourage counsellors who are ambivalent about EAP work or who are new to it to consider what it requires so that they can make informed decisions about

whether they choose to engage with it or not. Writing from a freelance workplace counsellor's perspective, Geetu Orme sums up the challenges of the work: 'The key is to alter and change, like a chameleon, yet to maintain our identity as workplace counsellors with our values and beliefs intact, in all contexts and cultures in which we work.'¹⁰

We need to listen to the needs of the client and the organisation. Balancing these different roles and responsibilities is a real art.⁴ ■

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