

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

Helping You Manage Your Company's Most Valuable Resource -- Employees

State Employee Assistance Program 1-800-308-4934 (Toll Free)

■ **An employee seems unusually tired lately. She says she has trouble sleeping. Can an EAP referral help her, or are sleeping problems more of a medical issue? I could simply recommend she speak with her doctor. There's nothing wrong with that, right?**

Your employee says she is not sleeping, but to say it is a "sleeping problem" with a medical solution is a diagnostic conclusion better left to the EAP, following an interview with your employee. Sleeping problems could be caused by many things—even drug or alcohol use. Telling someone to see a doctor for a healthcare problem sounds like a no-brainer. However, in the workplace you must consider other factors and your role. This makes the EAP your best bet. From this gateway, the employee can access all options. For a simple case of insomnia, the EAP might probe to determine the cause, and suggest practical steps that promote deep sleep. For more complex sleep problems—from anxiety disorders to nagging physical pain to disrupted circadian rhythm patterns—the EAP can provide a referral to the appropriate health expert. The EAP will also distinguish between physiological and psychological factors that disturb sleep.

■ **I'm impressed by the improvement in a worker's personality since he started going to the EAP. His peers marvel at how he's changed, too. I'd like to tell them it's due to the EAP. Should I ask for his permission to disclose that?**

No. There is no need for you to seek testimonials to convince people to use the EAP. If your worker is pleased with his progress, he may choose to tell others about his positive EAP experience. Even if he doesn't, there are better ways to introduce your staff to the benefits of the EAP, than by advertising the success stories of satisfied employees. The very act of asking for his permission to disclose his EAP involvement can create tension, in light of the need for confidentiality. He may readily agree to your request. However, others who are considering contacting the EAP may hesitate, if they worry that you will later expect them to publicly share their experience. Therefore, your well-intentioned action can have the unintended consequence of dissuading people who need the EAP from using it. Moreover, that can exacerbate problems in your department as employees' serious issues go untreated.

■ **A local psychologist visited our work unit and spoke on motivation and goal setting. He did a great job, but several employees are now patients in his**

Obviously your employees were impressed enough to take advantage of this psychologist's services, but it would have been improper for you to discourage their self-referral to his private practice outside work. The psychologist's practice does not interfere with the EAP because the EAP is not a psychotherapy provider. Any pursuit of improved mental health is a good thing, but you should remember that mental health professionals from the community, visiting with your employees, might

psychotherapy practice. Should I have discouraged them, and instead referred them to the EAP?

have secondary goals of promoting their services. They may not act as objective referral agents and send employees to the best source of help for themselves, but instead refer them to their private practice. Employee assistance professionals also speak to work groups on various topics such as motivation and goal setting. They can also identify speakers for you who will present to your group, but with the expectation of not promoting their services while doing so.

■ I want employees to see the EAP as an ongoing resource even if they don't have serious problems. What's the best way to pitch it to them as a sounding board that everyone can use?

At every opportunity, present the EAP as a valuable benefit for all employees. Emphasize the positive role it plays in helping people enhance their lives—from gaining a better work-life balance, to improving personal efficiency, to assisting with career advancement. When employees view the EAP as a source of information, insight, and support, they will use it even if they never need to fight battles that threaten their well-being. Given the growing interest in health and wellness, you can present the EAP as a partner in helping people reduce stress and make smart personal care choices. To persuade employees to seek out the EAP, ask questions that guide their decision-making such as, “Do you think you’d find it beneficial to get input from a caring, knowledgeable source?” That’s better than making “should” statements such as, “I think you should use the EAP.”

■ Another supervisor told me that one of my best employees frequently bullies coworkers when I'm not around. My employee is so gentle. I find it hard to believe he's a bully. Should I investigate or ignore this?

Ignoring this situation poses risks. If your employee engages in bullying behavior, it can harm morale and undermine team performance. Even worse, other employees may lose faith in your leadership if they think you’ve been duped into believing that this individual is gentle. This can breed cynicism and weaken your authority. Most supervisors eventually learn that when it comes to employees, appearances can deceive. A seemingly kind, thoughtful worker can come across as a demon to others. Investigate the matter by meeting privately with the employee—and then his coworkers—to gather information. Also, observe how this person interacts with his colleagues and look for evidence of intimidation or discord. You may want to visit the EAP to learn about the nature of bullying in the workplace and how to manage it.

NOTES:

Have a happy and safe holiday season!