

EAPs Invited to Join ‘BIG’ Initiative

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“Alcohol and substance-related problems present a clear threat to employers in terms of productivity loss, safety, employee engagement, use of supervisory time, and health care costs. The problem is that most employees with substance-abuse problems go unrecognized and even more go untreated. Most Employee Assistance Programs, which employers think are addressing this problem, do a very poor job of case finding for alcohol and drug problems. However, in most instances, unless calls the EAP specifically to request alcohol or drug treatment, substance-abuse problems will go unnoticed.”

-- John Pompe, Manager of Disability and Behavioral Health Programs, Caterpillar, Inc.

Employee Assistance Programs are invited to join the Brief Intervention Group, or “BIG” Initiative. BIG is an exciting new effort of the EAP industry in the U.S. and Canada to work together to identify and treat employees with alcohol-related problems as a means of increasing overall productivity and engagement in the workplace.

Today, fewer than 10% of issues that U.S. and Canadian EAPs address are recorded as “alcohol” related. But the fact is, many more employees struggle with alcohol-related issues than this number indicates. **S**creening, **B**rief **I**ntervention, and **R**eferral to **T**reatment (SBIRT) is a well-researched practice that has demonstrated consistent success in correctly identifying alcohol needs in employees and assisting them in reducing hazardous use.

However, SBIRT is not widely or consistently used in our field – at least not yet. By working together to promote routine screening and brief motivational counseling for alcohol, EAPs will help their corporate customers and their employees to remain productive and healthy. Together, we can increase EAP call centers’ and office-based EAP counselors’ adherence to SBIRT evidence-based protocols.

The remainder of this article will describe SBIRT and the BIG Initiative in greater detail. (An accompanying sidebar will also list the BIG participants, to date.)

SBIRT

Risky, hazardous, and harmful drinking is associated with physical and emotional health problems, alcohol-related traffic crashes, alcohol-impaired driving, accidents, and alcohol-involved violence. The financial burden of substance abuse to the U.S. economy is roughly \$190 billion annually in:

- Lost productivity;
- Injury;
- Disease;
- Law enforcement; and
- Criminal justice.

The majority of at-risk drinkers are employed full or part time. EAPs are uniquely positioned to identify and intervene early with at-risk employees *before* their drinking results in adverse consequences or they become alcohol dependent.

The SBIRT uses a brief, valid, scientific, alcohol-screening tool (it takes just 5 minutes or less) to identify whether drinking places an employee at risk for negative consequences. Depending on the results from the screening questions, the EAP clinician may provide health

education, simple advice, motivational counseling, and help with an action plan and/or referral for treatment.

Although SBIRT is *not* a treatment for alcohol dependence, it *can* help workers with serious alcohol problems to follow through on treatment referrals. SBIRT is especially well-suited for employees and family members who drink at unhealthy or hazardous levels.

The BIG Initiative

The BIG Initiative is a campaign that engages many of the leading EAP vendors, businesses, EAP professionals, and benefits consultants who are working together to advance the use of SBIRT across the EAP industry. *The intent is to make alcohol screening and brief intervention a routine practice across the field by October 2011.*

Drs. Eric Goplerud and Tracy McPherson at the Center for Integrated Behavioral Health and Ensuring Solutions to Alcohol Problems, at George Washington University, are facilitating the BIG Initiative. Employee assistance providers in the U.S. and Canada have been working together since October 2009 to alter the way EAPs screen and manage alcohol problems.

A grant from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT) is underwriting the organizing costs of the BIG Initiative. Since its initial meeting at the Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAP) conference last fall, the BIG Initiative has organized a campaign that includes:

- Employers;
- The largest national EAP vendors;
- Many regional and internal corporate EAPs;
- Professional clinical associations;
- Federal and state agencies;
- Benefits consultants; and
- Researchers.

The focus of BIG is to make alcohol screening and brief intervention for problem solving the universal practice of the industry. The BIG Initiative has organized committees, including:

- ✓ *Steering Committee*, made up of senior leaders in the EAP field;
- ✓ *Implementation Committee*, focused on changing EAP call center practices;
- ✓ *Marketing/Outreach Committee*, centered on office-based clinician training; and
- ✓ *Performance Measurement/Accountability Committee*, focused on identification of measurement tools to assess program impact on health and business outcomes.

Get Involved

BIG works with all interested EAP providers and suppliers to standardize the delivery of SBIRT within their call centers and networks of office-based affiliates. The goal of the BIG Initiative is to obtain “buy-in” from the entire EAP industry, EAP providers, suppliers, employers, and network affiliates. If clinicians hear from every EAP whose panel they serve on, that alcohol screening and brief intervention is expected and encouraged, then we can start to change practice.

If every EAP and EAP clinical professional organization’s continuing education websites offer consistent training materials on SBIRT, then the clear message will be heard. If EAPs begin seeing RFPs from benefits consultants and employers specifying alcohol SBI, then practice will change.

The BIG Initiative can link EAP vendors, clinicians, employers, and consultants into a learning collaborative. BIG can provide SBIRT materials, call center and clinician webinar and

classroom training, over-the-phone coaching, and opportunities to share with EAP colleagues across the industry.

Summary

Working together across the EAP field to implement evidence-based SBI can play a significant role in reversing some of the insidious and devastating effects of hazardous drinking that spill over into workplace health and productivity.

For more information, contact Tracy McPherson at esap1234@gmail.com and/or Eric Goplerud at goplerud@gwu.edu. They conduct research on the integration of alcohol screening, brief intervention, referral to treatment, and follow-up care in EAPs. Patricia Herlihy, Ph.D., studies the integration of EAP, work/life, and wellness services. She may be reached at p_herlihy@brownbear.us. Dave Sharar, Ph.D., is a provider and evaluator of EAPs and related services. Contact him at dsharar@chestnut.org.

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