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EAP Newsletter

In our society, we often assume that we have complete control over our lives—that we're responsible for creating our own pathways and ensuring our success. While that certainly is true in a sense—we can work incredibly hard and try to be the best that we can be—at the end of the day, sometimes we can't control what happens to us. When we experience stress or challenges that impact our health, they may be the result of barriers or conditions outside of our own control.

This month, we sat down with Denise Walden, from Erie Niagara Area Health Education Center (Erie AHAC), to discuss how some barriers—what she calls social determinants—may impact the lives of our co-workers or clients. “The important thing is that once we understand how barriers can impact health and success, we can take control back where it's possible and be a better advocate for ourselves and those with whom we work in the workplace and in our community.”



Detecting the Hidden Barriers

It can be difficult to see what barriers a co-worker or client is experiencing. After all, it's hard enough to see the barriers that get in our own way, and we know ourselves better than anyone. “Think of life as a play,” Walden urges, “and the stresses that you can't immediately see in someone's life are hiding behind the curtain.” Sometimes we try to hide the stresses we're experiencing to maintain appearances; maybe we feel shame because we do feel responsible for them, even if we're not. “People often hide the stresses they are experiencing because of barriers including a lack access to transportation, childcare, healthy food sources, safe housing, and financial stability,” Walden reveals. “You can't read someone's mind and know what they're experiencing.” However, once you understand that there may be hidden barriers, you can begin a conversation with them that acknowledges their actions may have some underlying causes.

Your goal in understanding these barriers isn't to create excuses for people; it's to understand them as people. “We

have to keep in mind that we are all working for and around human beings. When we start to think that way, it changes the way we empathize with them and helps us understand potential barriers we are all dealing with in different ways.” When a co-worker is not doing their job to the fullest of their ability, or when a client isn't following through with something they agreed to do, it may be because something outside of their control is getting in the way. A co-worker may not have come into work because they had no one to look after their child for the night shift; a client may have missed an appointment because they did not have had enough money for the copay.

What can you do?

1. Accept that barriers exist, for yourself and for others. “When we start to understand potential barriers that affect our co-workers, clients, and even ourselves, it can impact the way we implement programs, projects, care, and support.”
2. Ask why someone is acting the way they are, and be ready to listen and empathize with the barriers they are identifying.
3. If your colleague is struggling, refer them to EAP. Reassure them that it is okay to get support for the issues they're facing.
4. Don't judge. “The point of these barriers is that they're not something a person has much control over. The person you're talking to likely feels shame about what they're experiencing, and they don't need your judgement on top of that.”

Are you struggling? Call EAP to schedule a free and confidential counseling session. EAP can provide referrals to consultations for nutrition, legal, financial, child care, elder care, and tobacco cessation. Take advantage of the resources available to you to help minimize the barriers impacting your life.