

Drugs and Alcohol in the Workplace

WHY WORRY ABOUT DRUGS AND ALCOHOL IN THE WORKPLACE?

Because the worker next to you may be drunk, high, or hungover.

More than 70 percent of substance abusers hold jobs; one worker in four, ages 18 to 34, used drugs in the past year; and one worker in three knows of drug sales in the workplace.

Americans consume 60 percent of the world's production of illegal drugs: 23 million use marijuana at least four times a week; 18 million abuse alcohol; 6 million regularly use cocaine; and 2 million use heroin.

In the workplace, the problems of these substance abusers become your problems. They increase risk of accident, lower productivity, raise insurance costs, and reduce profits. They can cost you your job; they can cost you your life.

What is Substance Abuse?

Men and women dependent on heroin, cocaine, or crack—who must have these potent drugs to get through the day—are clearly substance abusers. And drug dependency takes more than one form. You need not be physically addicted (and suffer painful bodily symptoms of withdrawal when denied your drug of choice) to be drug dependent. Psychological dependency is equally responsible for compulsive drug use.

But substance abuse covers a range of behavior that goes far beyond dependency. Abuse may involve regular marijuana use, heavy drinking, weekend binges, casual consumption of tranquilizers, or misuse of other prescription drugs. It includes any use of drugs or alcohol that threatens physical or mental health, inhibits responsible personal relationships, or diminishes the ability to meet family, social, or vocational obligations.

Does it Threaten Jobs?

Substance abusers don't have to indulge on the job to have a negative impact on the work- place. Compared to their non- abusing coworkers, they are:

- Ten times more likely to miss work
- 3.6 times more likely to be involved in on-the-job accidents (and 5 times more likely to injure themselves or another in the process)
- Five times more likely to file a worker's compensation claim
- 33% less productive
- Responsible for health care costs that are three times as high.

Operating machinery under the influence of alcohol or drugs is clearly high-risk. But danger also increases when reflexes or judgment are compromised to any degree by drugs or alcohol. And substance abusers are not only five times more likely than other workers to cause injuries, they are also responsible for 40 percent of all industrial fatalities.

Working at minimal capacity, these workers increase the workloads of others, lower productivity, compromise product quality, and can tarnish a company's image. Their absences and health care demands raise costs. They reduce competitiveness and profitability, weakening the companies that employ them and threatening everyone's job security.

What are the Signs of Abuse?

Substance abusers in the workplace can be difficult to identify. But there are some clues that signal possible drug and alcohol problems.

Here's what to look for:

- Frequent, prolonged, and often unexplained absences
- Involvement in accidents both on and off the job
- Erratic work patterns and reduced productivity
- Indifference to personal hygiene
- Overreaction to real or imagined criticism
- Such overt physical signs as exhaustion or hyperactivity, dilated pupils, slurred speech, or an unsteady walk

Marijuana users may have bloodshot or glassy eyes and a persistent cough.

Cocaine users display increased energy and enthusiasm early in their drug involvement. Later they may be subject to extreme mood swings and can become paranoid or delusional.

Alcohol abusers find it hard to conceal morning-after hangovers. Their productivity declines, and they may show signs of physical deterioration.

How Can it Be Prevented?

A comprehensive drug-free workplace program may be the best means of preventing, detecting, and dealing with substance abusers.

Such a program generally includes the following elements:

- A written policy that is supported by top management, understood by all employees, consistently enforced, and perfectly clear about what is expected of employees and the consequences of policy violations.
- A substance abuse prevention program with an employee drug education component that focuses not only on the dangers of drug and alcohol use but also on the availability of counseling and treatment.
- Training of managers, front-line supervisors, human resource personnel, medical staff, and others in identifying and dealing with substance abusers.
- An appropriate drug and alcohol testing component, designed to prevent the hiring of workers who use illegal drugs and—as part of a comprehensive program—provide early identification and referral to treatment for employees with drug or alcohol problems.
- An Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

Employee Assistance Programs that provide counseling for employees and their family members are structured to help workers with a wide range of problems. Substance abuse is a primary concern.

Working with substance abusers, EAP professionals seek to provide whatever assistance makes it possible for employees to remain on or return to the job. Many companies offer counseling and treatment services or refer employees to services in the community. It is sometimes necessary for workers to take time off for treatment. In these cases, successful completion of a rehabilitation program generally brings the former substance abusers back to the workforce.

What Can You Do?

Substance abusers in the workplace create a problem that affects you and should concern you. There are a number of ways in which you can do something about it.

Don't be an "enabler."

When you cover up for substance abusers, lend them money, or help conceal poor work performance, you are protecting them from the consequences of their behavior. You are making it possible for them to continue abusing drugs or alcohol. You may think you're being a friend, but you are doing them no favor.

Don't "look the other way."

If you suspect drugs are being used or being sold, you should pass the word to a supervisor or to security or human resources personnel. Such contacts are confidential and, in many organizations, this information can be conveyed anonymously.

Don't intervene on your own.

Drug abuse and drug dealing are serious problems that should be handled by qualified professionals.

Don't worry about jeopardizing a substance abuser's job.

Employees are often reluctant to let management know when they suspect drug activity, worried that any coworkers they identify will be penalized or even lose their jobs. The reality is that you place a co-worker in far greater jeopardy when you don't report your concern and, in that way, make continued drug use possible.

Bear in mind that the threat of being fired often provides a potent deterrent to substance abuse and will prompt many drug- and alcohol-troubled workers to accept help when they had previously ignored the pleas of family and friends. Faced with the possibility of losing their jobs, workers who had refused to recognize or acknowledge their substance abuse are often motivated to enter treatment and—what may be even more important—remain in treatment long enough to make fundamental changes in attitudes and behavior.

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