



### **Substance Abuse & Maturity**

Did you know that substance abuse at a young age can stop the emotional maturity process? Some people get "stuck" and never mature beyond the age at which they began using drugs or alcohol. And the younger one is when they begin using, the more vulnerable that person becomes. If he or she already has a predisposition to, or already has a mental illness, substance abuse will make it worse.

Adolescents who abuse alcohol and drugs have tremendous difficulty transitioning into adulthood. Do you know an adult who still acts like a preteen or teenager? Some people continue to exhibit immature behavior into their 40s, 50s and even 60s. Many individuals who experience difficulties at school and work, financial and legal problems, relationship problems, and anger management issues are suffering from stunted emotional growth due to substance abuse at a young age.

Adults are expected to "act their age" and display wisdom, respect, and courtesy to others. But these traits can be impeded and often blocked entirely by early drug and alcohol use. If there is any doubt, just spend some time reading the angry, insulting, and embarrassing comments posted online by adults who admit to early and ongoing substance use (and often brag about it).

Research has clearly identified solid links between teenaged substance abuse and adverse adult outcomes. People who drink large amounts of alcohol, smoke copious amounts of marijuana or use other drugs early in life generally experience problems

with emotional maturity. Most people have witnessed others make choices during active drug or alcohol addiction that do not reflect the actions of a mature and responsible adult.

### **Drug Abuse and Brain Development**

Substance abuse early in life has been found to lead to higher addiction rates (up to 80%). Youthful drug use often results in an inability to do well in school, to plan and make good life choices, and to make important decisions. People who become addicted at a young age do not respond well under pressure or in emergency situations. They suffer from higher crime rates, increased violence (as both perpetrators and victims), higher unemployment rates, and greater rates of imprisonment and early death.

Most people know that the human brain continues developing throughout adolescence all the way up to age 25. Brain development research has found that the maturing brain is especially vulnerable to the effects of alcohol and drugs. This is why early substance abuse significantly increases a young person's risk of suffering from stunted maturity levels and developing addiction problems later in life. This phenomenon is known as "arrested development."

Human behavior is also, of course, impacted by social and cultural (environmental) factors, but there is overwhelming evidence that the adolescent brain is uniquely susceptible to the short- and long-term effects of substance abuse. Early drug use alters brain maturation, contributes to lasting cognitive impairment of certain functions, and significantly increases susceptibility for developing a substance use disorder.

## Addressing the Problem(s)

So, what can a person who is suffering from emotional immaturity do to improve? The first step is to learn how to become present and aware of feelings.

Addicts avoid dealing with difficult emotions when they arise and bury their feelings by drinking or drugging. Instead, when feelings of anger, loneliness, self-hate, or insecurity surface, it is best to face them head-on. Mature adults assess difficult situations, determine what is making them feel the way they do, and decide what positive steps to take next.

Another way to focus on improvement is to join a support group. Being surrounded by like-minded individuals allows one to realize they are not alone and that others have reached levels of positive personal growth in spite of setbacks.

***The following suicide prevention information is provided by the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities:***

### **Workplace Suicide Prevention**

Unless we or someone we know has been impacted by suicide, we may think of it as "someone else's problem." We might think that suicide is only a problem faced by people with mental illness. However, anyone can be impacted by suicide (from a homeless person to a wealthy celebrity), and only half of people who die by suicide have ever been diagnosed with a mental illness.

There are some groups that are at greater risk. Middle aged and older adults, especially men, are at increased risk. Native Americans, Veterans, LGBTQ+, and Suicide

Loss Survivors are also populations with higher-than-average risk. Surprisingly, there are also certain job types with higher rates of suicide.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), suicide rates have been significantly higher in the following industries and occupations: Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction; Construction; Installation, Maintenance, and Repair; Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Hunting; Transportation, Material Moving, and Warehousing.

If you are a business owner or manager, please consider ways to support the workforce in your company or at your jobsite. In 2017, nearly 38,000 Americans of working age died by suicide. Be proactive and put measures and plans in place before it is too late. Websites such as [www.workplacesuicideprevention.com](http://www.workplacesuicideprevention.com) and [www.preventconstructionsuicide.com](http://www.preventconstructionsuicide.com) have great resources you can access to improve safety and save the lives of employees and coworkers.

Suicide is preventable. And suicide prevention is good for business!

If you experience any thoughts about suicide, call the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **1-800-273-8255**.

To learn more about suicide prevention, visit the DBHDD website at:  
<https://dbhdd.georgia.gov/suicide-prevention>.

Or contact the Suicide Prevention Director, Rachael Holloman, at:  
[rachael.holloman@dbhdd.ga.gov](mailto:rachael.holloman@dbhdd.ga.gov).

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:**  
1-800-273-TALK (8255).



# Supervisor Newsletter

## **COVID, Mental Health and Substance Abuse**

During the first two months of 2022, as the negative effects of COVID-19 variants impacted society, supervisors nationwide witnessed the mental health of employees decline and addiction levels continue to increase. As a direct result of the stress caused by the ongoing pandemic, substance abuse at work has become one of the most challenging organizational issues that supervisors are having to face in the new year.

As the pandemic lingers, supervisors must be aware that COVID-related mental health issues left untreated can lead to substance abuse. The harm of not addressing this potential increase in substance abuse at work is substantial.

Supervisors should be educated about preventing mental health problems and workplace addiction and bring this knowledge to employees. Prevention and education are universal strategies that are proven to work. Prevention includes creating connection and offering training and support.

The U.S. Department of Labor reports that establishing comprehensive drug free workplace programs that include

employee drug prevention education and supervisor training based on facts, not judgment or stigma, is the best way to address workplace substance abuse and prevent future problems.

## **Chronic Stress and Addiction**

The pandemic continues to have an adverse impact on people's mental health and there is no indication that mental health issues are going away. A recent Centers for Disease Control survey found that two in five adults are experiencing depression and anxiety during the pandemic. With COVID entering its third year, it is obvious that more and more employees will be experiencing mental health challenges going forward, and businesses will suffer from increased resignations, lower productivity, and other problems.

It is vitally important that supervisors understand that mental stress is a well-known risk factor in the development of addiction and addiction relapse. The term "stress" refers to processes involving perception, appraisal, and response to potentially harmful, threatening or challenging events (such as ongoing news reports of a global pandemic). The more prolonged, repeated, or chronic stress is, the greater the chances of developing, or relapsing into addictive behavior.



A lot of research has been conducted on the significant association between acute and chronic stress and the desire to use addictive substances. Many of the major theories of addiction also identify an important role of stress in the addiction process.

Prolonged emotional stress is associated with a loss of control over impulses, and an inability to stop inappropriate behaviors and to delay gratification. There is no question that long-lasting stress can lead to substance use disorders.

Use of the most commonly abused drugs such as alcohol, nicotine, cocaine, amphetamines, opioids, and marijuana activate brain reward pathways, but also activate brain stress pathways creating a desire for more of the substance being used. This leads to an ongoing cycle of stress to substance abuse, to increased stress, to increased use.

Employees who are struggling with stress-induced substance abuse need help to break the cycle of stress/addiction.

### **How Supervisors Can Help**

Supervisors can become change agents by offering proven solutions for employees who are struggling.

The first step is to make sure that supervisors can recognize signs and symptoms of employees who are

experiencing mental health distress or other issues such as substance misuse and can link them to the appropriate resources.

Cost-effective treatment for stress-related substance abuse disorders is now available from organizations that provide online assessments. An internet search will provide a long list of providers that offer substance abuse evaluations and assessments via phone and internet. However, these assessment tools are strictly for general information and are not a substitute for an in-person clinical evaluation.

Employees who are exhibiting signs of an inability to deal with prolonged and chronic stress need professional help and should be referred to the company Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or provided with a list of local treatment and counseling centers.

In addition to making employees aware of available treatment programs, supervisors should ensure that workers are educated on stress and resilience so that they are better prepared to recognize their own stress reactions and improve coping and self-care.

Supervisors should also lead by example and follow recommendations given to employees about managing stress, self-care, taking time off, and using company resources.