



## Substance Abuse and Mental Health

As detailed in previous *Employee Education Newsletters*, mental health conditions such as anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress, and bipolar disorder can be risk factors for substance use.

The use of alcohol and other drugs can increase the risk of mental health problems, and because substance abuse masks symptoms such as feeling anxious, depressed, or irritable, mental health problems are made worse over time. This results in a vicious cycle.

Knowing this, why then do individuals with mental health challenges use substances? There are many reasons, including attempting to self-medicate and deal with issues of stress, emotional or physical pain, anxiety, and sleep problems.

Research has also shown that brain changes in people with mental disorders can enhance the rewarding effect of substances making it more difficult to stop using. In the same way, substance abuse changes the structure of the brain and may make a person more likely to develop a mental disorder.

## Why do People Use Mind-Altering Substances?

It is well known that addiction ruins lives. Why then would anyone risk it? In some cases, both mental health and substance use disorders can run in families. Genetic traits can be passed down through generations and contribute to the development of not only physical, but mental disabilities.

Many people also turn to abusing drugs or alcohol to deal with the side effects of the medicine used to treat their mental or physical illness.

Sometimes, people use drugs or alcohol to avoid responsibilities (refusing to take responsibility for their actions), or to avoid the withdrawal symptoms that accompany abstinence.

Coping with intense emotions, escaping reality, reducing chronic pain, and forgetting problems are all a part of the reasons people abuse substances.

When asked why a person uses drugs or alcohol, the most common reason given is to get high and to reduce negative states of social anxiety and tension, or simply to relieve boredom.

When young people are asked why they started using drugs or alcohol,

the answer they most often give is to "alleviate social anxiety and make friends." Many teens say they began drug or alcohol use because of peer pressure to do so.

### **Recognizing the Signs**

How can someone know if a loved one or coworker is struggling with mental health or addiction challenges? Chronically abusing substances such as alcohol, nicotine, marijuana, and other drugs can be markers. Expressing prolonged feelings of sadness or hopelessness is another sign. Having difficulty focusing on one's job or personal life for prolonged periods of time could be a result of mental health problems. Frequent mood changes and physical changes in sleep or eating patterns are other red flags.

Loss of energy or motivation, neglecting one's appearance and/or drastic personality changes are often indicators.

Having economic difficulties, not paying bills on time, spending more money than usual, and requesting to borrow money are some possible financial signs of addiction.

Many people struggling with a substance use disorder have legal problems at some point in their life. This may be because they were caught in

possession of a drug, they were selling drugs, or they may have driven while intoxicated and hurt someone.

### **Providing Help**

How can we help those in our lives who are struggling with mental health and/or addiction problems? The most important first step in offering assistance is to be willing to listen to the person who may be in crisis with an open heart and mind. We must then validate that we understand how they are feeling and ask how we can best support them.

Offering to find professional help for someone who is suffering from mental health or substance use disorders could be the action that saves their life.

Chronic drug abusers who suffer from mental illness can be treated and healed. Over the past decade, researchers have investigated and identified the most effective way to treat drug abusers with mental illness and have learned how to treat both conditions simultaneously leading to better recovery.

If you believe that your loved one may be dealing with substance abuse or drug addiction, reaching out to them is the best way to start. Substance abuse can be overcome!



# Supervisor Newsletter

## Dealing with After-Hours Substance Abuse

Supervisors should always want to help employees who are struggling with a substance use disorder to get the assistance they need to overcome their substance abuse issues. But one must tread carefully when off-duty substance abuse is reported or suspected.

Because of state and federal laws that protect employees, supervisors should focus primarily on whether or not an employee is impaired while at work.

An employee who drinks alcohol or uses drugs outside of work hours is typically not subject to workplace substance abuse policies (unless the employee comes to work still impaired, or suffering from hangover-like symptoms that affect work performance). In some cases, withdrawal symptoms can be intense and make an individual feel physically ill and incapable of performing at peak levels which could result in disciplinary action at work.

### Enforce the Company Policy

Every company should have a written substance abuse policy

that prohibits using drugs or alcohol during work hours *and* gives supervisors recourse if an employee's performance is being affected by drug or alcohol abuse after-hours. Employees should of course be required to read and sign the policy when hired.

It is also important for supervisors to understand their specific responsibilities for initiating and carrying out the drug free workplace policy and program. If a supervisor suspects an employee is abusing drugs or alcohol, a good starting point is to gather evidence. Supervisors should document all performance problems, complete with dates and times. Keep in mind also that substance use can have major consequences even without addiction being present.

In addition to enforcing the company substance abuse policy, supervisors have other duties regarding employee performance and workplace safety. Supervisors and managers are responsible for identifying and correcting potential safety hazards (physical or human), investigating and reporting accidents, conducting accident prevention activities, training employees, and enforcing safe work practices.

### **Exigent Circumstances**

Some specific situations that occur in an employee's personal life might impact a supervisor's decision regarding employment action. For example, an arrest for driving under the influence, or for selling or possessing drugs could contribute to the totality of circumstances that might trigger a reasonable suspicion drug test at work.

If an employee's off-work substance abuse affects his or her job performance or safety, supervisors should always take disciplinary action. After-hours substance abuse can affect an employee's ability to meet professional expectations including the ability to attend work punctually and regularly, perform assigned duties competently and fully capacitated, and perform the job in a healthy, safe, and conscientious manner. When an employee is impaired, it can lead to accidents, inefficiency, and reduced productivity.

### **Providing Help**

Supervisors can help employees struggling with drug and alcohol addiction by encouraging them to deal with work-related problems that may be connected with alcohol or other

drug use. As the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) has stated, employers can and should hold employees who are alcoholics or drug addicts to the same performance standards that apply to other employees.

When talking to an employee about drug addiction however, the individual should be encouraged to seek treatment and be reminded that addiction is a disease. An employee may be hesitant to admit he or she needs help for addiction because of the fear of being judged as having a character flaw or being immoral. The employee should be helped to understand that the company recognizes that addiction is a health issue, not a moral failing.

Being an advocate for employees also means supporting substance abuse prevention, including brief screenings, early intervention, treatment, and recovery.

To help employees with substance abuse problems get the assistance needed, employers should offer comprehensive health plans that cover all stages of treatment for substance abuse disorders. The best plans cover treatment, counseling, aftercare, and educating employees on the dangers of abusing alcohol and drugs.