



Hangovers: Impact on the Workplace

Many people make jokes about hangovers, but being hungover at work is a health condition that should be taken seriously. Employees who are hungover have impaired attention, memory, and psychomotor skills. This can lead to an increased chance of workplace accidents.

Hangovers also have major economic consequences. In addition to the danger to the health and safety of coworkers and the public, millions of workdays are lost each year in the U.S. due to drug and alcohol hangovers. The cost to employers and the economy is in the billions of dollars. This does not include the losses in productivity due to decreased work performance or the cost of damage to company vehicles and property.

Drug Abuse Hangovers

It is important for employees and employers to understand that physical reactions similar to an alcohol hangover can occur after recreational and prescription drug abuse. As the body attempts to recover from the toxic effects of drug intoxication, the user may experience severe nausea and intense exhaustion.

Overexertion and lack of sleep while high can also contribute to this condition.

People who are coming down from a drug high or experiencing withdrawal from extended drug use often experience hangover-like symptoms such as:

- poor sleep quality,
- fatigue and weakness,
- headaches and muscle aches,
- nausea and vertigo,
- sensitivity to light and sound,
- anxiety and depression,
- an inability to focus,
- increased blood pressure,
- trouble functioning well for sometimes up to a month after discontinuing use.

These symptoms can negatively impact workplace safety and productivity. How productive can an employee be when his or her mind and body is struggling to process the physical aftereffects of drug abuse?

Drug abuse hangovers—just like an alcohol hangover—can also make mental illness symptoms worse and lead to psychological distress. Depression, anxiety, and psychosis are just a few of the conditions that are recognized as being potential substance-induced disorders.

Hangovers can also lead to increased conflict at work due to an impaired ability to reason and the potential for increased irritability due to not feeling well.

Cause and Effect

The effect of drug (and alcohol) hangovers can vary greatly depending on the substance used, as well as the duration, dosage, and amount. The impact of the hangover can be mental or physical disturbances and in some cases can be severe and even dangerous.

It is not known what exactly causes all of the symptoms of a drug-induced hangover, but it is likely that the cognitive and mood effects are a result of changes in neurotransmitter functions in the brain.

We do know that drug and alcohol abuse produces disruptions and changes in multiple metabolic processes throughout the body, and these changes impact individuals differently.

The reason for this is that the human body tries to maintain a constant state of homeostasis by regulating various physiological processes to keep internal states steady and balanced. When a substance that affects this balance is consumed, the body adjusts and compensates accordingly. When the presence of

this substance is removed or reduced, the body can't restore its equilibrium quickly enough and hangover-like symptoms occur.

In general, a hangover is comprised of multiple factors, and little can be done for it therapeutically.

Recovery and Prevention

An employee who is suffering from a drug or alcohol hangover may try to keep working at their usual pace, but this is often a mistake. Doing so can slow the recovery process resulting in delayed restoration of energy and possible injury due to a lack of rest and recuperation.

How quickly someone can recover from a drug or alcohol induced hangover depends on several factors. An individual who is in good health, with access to a strong support system and good sleep and nutrition advice may be able to recover in a few days if that person can take time off to rest. For others it might take several weeks.

The full impact of a hangover is difficult if not impossible to predict, but the one sure way to avoid it is to not use alcohol or drugs. The best way for employers to deal with the problem is to help prevent it in the first place through the implementation and maintenance of a drug free workplace program.



Supervisor Newsletter

Hungover Employees

Supervisors sometimes have the unpleasant responsibility of having to deal with a hungover employee.

A worker who is suffering from a drug or alcohol hangover will often manifest performance and conduct problems, and it is the supervisor's job to hold the employee accountable and take the necessary disciplinary action.

Most employers believe that an employee's decision to drink alcohol is that individual's personal choice, and employees have a right to privacy. But when alcohol abuse interferes with the ability to safely and adequately perform the job, supervisors have a legitimate concern and a duty to act.

When a hangover is the result of illicit drug use, or prescription drug abuse, the employee may be in violation of the company substance abuse policy and the appropriate action must be taken.

Hungover employees may experience the following problems:

- Strained relationships with coworkers
- Missed deadlines
- Incomplete assignments
- Careless or sloppy work
- Flawed analysis
- Sleeping on duty
- Avoidance of supervisory contact
- Accidents or injuries on the job

Not any one of these signs in and of itself means that an employee is hungover of course, but these types of performance issues coupled with other signs could indicate a drug or alcohol use problem. It is important for supervisors to document employee misconduct like those listed above on a reasonable suspicion checklist and take action based on a totality of circumstances.

Disciplinary Action

The company substance abuse policy should guide supervisors in how to handle an employee who is suffering from the effects of alcohol or drugs. It will be important to follow the policy when dealing with a hungover employee.

If a supervisor has reason to believe that an employee is hungover at work, it will be necessary to meet with the employee to confirm the suspicion. The meeting should be held in a private place away from distractions. The supervisor should be polite but firm during the meeting. It is ok to ask the employee outright if he or she has a hangover. If the answer is yes, the employee might need to be sent home for the day.

If an employee makes a statement that he or she is hungover, document the statement and ask the individual to sign the statement so that there will be written proof in case of a future incident. Remember that if an employee shows up to work visibly hungover and admits to it, employers have a right to terminate immediately, although other options do exist.

Typically, a first-time offense of coming to work hungover will result in the employee being sent home and a written warning issued, but if the same employee repeatedly comes to work hungover, termination may ultimately be the only option and good documentation will be important.

Human Resources (HR) personnel (if available) should be notified when a supervisor makes the determination that an employee has arrived at

work hungover. HR can help advise supervisors of the appropriate administrative actions to be taken.

Keep in mind that as a supervisor, you are responsible for confronting a hungover employee, but it is not your job to try and diagnose substance abuse disorders. That should be left to treatment and counseling professionals within the company Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

If a decision is made to refer an employee to the company EAP, a counselor will usually meet with the employee, assess or diagnose the problem, and if necessary, refer the employee to a treatment program. If the employee signs a release, the counselor may keep supervisor(s) informed as to the nature of the problem, what type of treatment (if any) may be needed and the progress of the employee in treatment.

Conclusion

A hangover can interfere with an employee's ability to properly perform his or her duties. A hangover negatively impacts the health and safety of workers, and employee conduct in the workplace. Supervisors have a day-to-day responsibility to monitor the work and on-the-job conduct of employees, and therefore should take the appropriate action when an employee comes to work hungover.