

Recognizing a Substance Abuse Problem and What to Do

Substance abuse is a serious problem in the workplace. The National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that 8.7 percent of full-time workers 18 to 64 years old used alcohol heavily in the past month, 8.6 percent used illicit drugs in the past month, and 9.5 percent were dependent on or abused alcohol or illicit drugs in the past year. An estimated 70 percent of substance abusers are employed and active in the workforce, [studies show](#).

A substance abuse problem may involve the overuse of alcohol, prescription drugs, nonprescription drugs, or any combination of those items. Marijuana is the most commonly used and abused illegal drug by employees, according to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence ([NCADD](#)), followed by cocaine, with prescription drug use steadily increasing.

When working with a substance-abusing employee on a daily basis, you will likely see behaviors that interfere with the employee's productivity and may, in some cases, even undermine the safety of your work team.

While it may be tempting to look the other way, managers are responsible for dealing with this serious and complex workplace challenge. It's important to know how to involve the appropriate company authorities as well as how to respond when you suspect a substance abuse problem.

“Alcohol and drug use among employees and their family members can be an expensive problem for business and industry, with issues ranging from lost productivity, absenteeism, injuries, fatalities, theft and low employee morale, to an increase in health care, legal liabilities and workers' compensation costs.”

—NCADD

Learn to recognize the signs of substance abuse

The signs include:

- skipping work or being frequently absent, especially on Mondays and Fridays
- tardiness
- sleeping on the job
- having accidents on or off the job
- worsening productivity
- poor decision-making
- taking longer than normal to complete tasks
- being late coming back from lunch or breaks
- having conflicts with co-workers
- poor personal hygiene or grooming
- increased irritability, nervousness, or angry outbursts
- theft
- excessive concerns about money or borrowing money from co-workers

Some other indicators that an employee is currently impaired include:

- smell of alcohol or marijuana
- slurred speech
- inability to concentrate
- stumbling or lack of coordination

- change in personality, erratic behavior, overly talkative
- dilated or constricted pupils
- bloodshot eyes

What to do

Know your company policies and your responsibilities as a manager. Handling substance abuse issues is one of the most difficult situations a manager can face. Your company has policies and procedures to protect you, the company, your employee, and your team. Read these policies carefully and attend all related training programs so you know what to do if you need to address such a situation.

Talk with your human resources (HR) representative or your employee assistance program (EAP) immediately about your concerns. If the situation is acute and you observe an employee who is visibly impaired and is in a safety-sensitive position, such as driving or operating machinery, you may need to immediately relieve the employee of duty and ask him or her to wait in an office with a supervisor until you get further instruction for action. In less critical situations, you may be able to talk over a variety of actions and discuss your options with a knowledgeable professional.

When you are concerned about substance abuse, focus on the employee's job performance, not the employee's appearance. For example, people who may appear to exhibit signs of alcohol abuse—slurred speech or trembling hands—may have a medical condition instead.

To address workplace performance, focus on behavior. Address the workplace behavior by stating your observations. You might say, "Joe, you were out of the office for almost an hour today and it was not a scheduled break or lunch period. This also happened last Friday. Please tell me what is going on." Get the employee's explanation first, to make sure that something like a serious family issue is not the problem.

Remember that resources are available to your employee. In any situation where the employee expresses personal distress and tells you that he or she is struggling, refer the employee to the EAP. If you feel there may be a substance abuse problem, always talk with your company's HR manager, your manager, or the EAP before suggesting the employee contact the EAP. It can be a very helpful benefit for the employer and the employee when a substance abuse issue is addressed.

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What not to do

Avoid getting involved in the employee's personal problems.

Avoid diagnosing or assessing. Do not assume the employee has a drug or an alcohol problem. A diagnosis can only be made by a mental health or substance abuse professional.

Avoid offering advice about what the employee should and should not do.

Do not avoid the problem and hope it will go away. The sooner you seek a consultation, the better it will be for you, your employee, and your organization.



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