

ALCOHOL AWARENESS AND THE WORKPLACE

The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence has declared April, Alcohol Awareness Month. The purpose of Alcohol Awareness Month is to increase awareness and understanding, reduce stigma and encourage local communities to focus on alcoholism and alcohol-related issues.

Some facts about alcohol in the workplace from NCADD:

- Workers with alcohol problems were 2.7 times more likely than workers without drinking problems to have injury-related absences.
- A hospital emergency department study showed that 35 percent of patients with an occupational injury were at-risk drinkers.
- Breathalyzer tests detected alcohol in 16% of emergency room patients injured at work.
- Analyses of workplace fatalities showed that at least 11% of the victims had been drinking.
- Large federal surveys show that 24% of workers report drinking during the workday at least once in the past year.
- One-fifth of workers and managers across a wide range of industries and company sizes report that a co-worker's on- or off-the-job drinking jeopardized their own productivity and safety.

The NCADD reports that fifteen million full time workers are heavy drinkers resulting in costs to organizations in absenteeism, excessive sick leave, health problems, injuries/accidents on the job, workplace conflict and low levels of productivity.

The **organizational impact** includes:

- Low morale
- High turnover
- High Workers' Comp costs due to accidents
- Higher levels of short term and long term disability
- Poor decision making
- Use of manager's time to manage work difficulties, performance and attendance problems
- Excessive disciplinary issues
- Decreased efficiency, and productivity

The problem stems not only from those labelled as alcoholics but those who drink heavily the night before and come to work hung over along with those who drink heavily right before work or during work hours. In addition, families are impacted and family members coping with another's excessive drinking also demonstrate work performance problems.

What Can a Workplace Do?

The most effective thing a workplace can do is manage all employees well. It is **NOT** the job of the workplace to diagnose substance abuse but in managing people well and addressing work difficulties as they occur, the workplace is decreasing the impact of substance abuse.

Substance abusers try to hide their addiction and cover up mistakes and other job performance difficulties. They often deny that the problems exist, blame others and divert a manager's attention to other issues. The best thing a manager can do is follow **basic supervisory practices** and **address**

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performance issues as they occur. Using those skills a manager should:

- **Document** the specific job performance difficulties using behavioral terms with no judgment or conjecture about the cause of the problem
- Avoid discussing the employee's personal difficulties, **direct them to the EAP** for assistance instead.
- Specifically state the behaviors that have to change related to the job performance in **direct behavioral terms**
- Set a specific **time frame** in which changes in job performance have to occur and when the manager will follow-up
- **Follow-up** and give the employee specific behavioral feedback about the things that have improved and those that continue to need improvement

Most employees value their job. When the problems caused by substance abuse threaten their job, an employee is more likely to seek assistance. Most substance abusers will not seek treatment unless the consequences of their use begins to impair their ability to carry on with their life. The possibility of losing a job is an important motivator to seek treatment.

How Can Your EAP Help?

Your Employee Assistance Program is an important organizational partner in addressing the costs associated with employee substance abuse. The role of the EAP takes many forms and is not only associated with the clinical assessment. The EAP should also:

- Provide **management training** in the identification of work performance problems, documentation and referral to the EAP

- **Consult** with managers to plan the tough conversations with employees about their job performance
- Provide management consultation to **assist managers** with employees' job performance difficulties and structured improvement plan

A recovering employee will need continued support and the EAP functions as an intermediary between the workplace and the employee to ensure that the employee has the treatment supports needed for ongoing recovery. The EAP also provides consultation to the manager about any questions or concerns regarding the recovering employee and handling those concerns in the workplace.

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