



Managing Employees with Substance Use/Misuse Addictions

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the loneliness and unemployment brought on by a public health crisis significantly increased drug and alcohol misuse. The Mental Health Index by LifeWorks found alcohol consumption increased by 31% and drug use increased by 29%, pushing conversations about Substance Use Disorders (SUD) into the spotlight.

A 2018 national survey on drug use found that “approximately 70% of all adults with an alcohol or illicit drug use disorder are employed,” and nearly 9% of all employed adults, or almost 13.6 million workers, currently have alcohol or illicit drug use disorders.

If you are an HR leader, these statistics indicate that you likely manage employees with SUD. Consequently, you must be prepared to recognize the warning signs of substance misuse, know how to respond to employees with SUD, and are familiar with state and federal laws, as well as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) that may allow or require time off to seek treatment instead of termination.

Supervisors and managers should be trained to watch out for the warning signs of substance misuse, but characteristics of substance misuse do not always indicate someone with SUD. It’s a complex problem.

Performance signs often include:

- + Frequent absences without notification
- + Excessive use of sick days
- + Frequent disappearances from the office
- + Long, unexplained absences throughout the day
- + Failing to meet deadlines
- + Sporadic periods of high and low productivity

Personality signs often include:

- + Increase in accidents on and off the job
- + Confusion and trouble concentrating
- + Difficulty remembering instructions
- + Isolation and problems relating with co-workers

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Physical signs often include:

- + Progressive deterioration in grooming and hygiene
- + Mood swings of exhaustion and hyperactivity
- + Often appears hungover or unsteady
- + Dilated pupils or slurred speech

By learning the warning signs of substance misuse and watching out for them, HR leaders can lessen the negative impact on the workplace regarding safety, performance, and costs. Depending on your company's substance use policy, management can guide employees to find help or exit them from the company.

The following strategies can help HR leaders manage employees with SUD, avoid negative stereotypes, and safeguard their organization from the dangers of substance misuse in the workplace.

CHANGE THE WAY YOU TALK ABOUT DRUG AND ALCOHOL MISUSE

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders combined the diagnoses of "substance abuse" and "substance dependence" as Substance Use Disorders (SUD). SUD is a complex condition, but people with it often cannot control their use, mainly when misuse results from anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses. Unfortunately, it's typical for people with SUD to be labeled with negative stereotypes and thought of as lacking moral character.

Words matter. When discussing addiction and the people who suffer from it, we can change our words to reduce stigma and the negative connotations surrounding the illness. Experts now suggest "substance use" and "substance misuse" in place of "substance abuse." Similarly, someone who would previously be labeled an addict can instead be referred to as a person with SUD or someone who is addicted to drugs.

IMPLEMENT A SUBSTANCE USE POLICY

A proactive step businesses can take for managing employees with SUD is to create a company-wide substance use policy that outlines the company's expectations of a drug and alcohol-free workplace.

Your business's substance use policy should also have clear expectations and guidelines surrounding prescription drug use and legalized marijuana. A written policy for everybody creates a blanket behavior standard that mitigates feelings of being singled out.

In your company's substance use policy, have a protocol to document reasonable suspicion of misuse and instances of warning signs. In this policy, you may also outline a no-tolerance approach or steps of disciplinary action, including termination.

OFFER LEAVE FOR TREATMENT OF SUBSTANCE MISUSE

Before considering ways to help or handle an employee who has confirmed substance misuse, a conversation needs to be had. Raising this issue is not always easy or comfortable. If you suspect an employee of drug or alcohol misuse, confronting the person can be difficult. Unless your company implements random drug testing, a performance review or one-on-one discussion is one of the best ways to elicit a candid conversation and hopefully clarify your suspicions.



Keep the conversation performance-related. Let the employee know you've observed certain behaviors, ask for an explanation, and offer help related to the work. Someone with SUD will likely be reluctant to seek help or admit to misuse when confronted. They may be in denial, fear the stigma of being labeled an alcoholic or a drug addict, or fear termination, despite employee assistance programs. Nevertheless, this strategy allows the opportunity for the employee to confirm your suspicions – if substance misuse is, in fact, the cause of your observations.

By sticking to performance-related facts and office policies, you remove judgment and stigma – the rules are for everybody. Then inform the employee of your expectations surrounding their work going forward and the consequences of poor performance and conduct. Based on the result of these conversations, continued performance and behavior reviews may be necessary.

Suppose an employee discloses they suffer from substance misuse or failed a drug test. In that case, the substance use policy has been violated, and discussions around disciplinary action and leave options per your company's policies can begin.

For instance, the company can choose to help an employee with a return-to-work agreement or time off for treatment, depending on state laws and the nature of the work.

CONSEQUENCES REFLECT COMPANY CULTURE

When considering the consequences of a substance use policy violation, different roles merit different responses, as does its impact on the business. Depending on your business and location, there may be regulations surrounding managing employees with SUD. For instance, safety-sensitive positions often necessitate immediate action because failing to remove an employee from work puts people at risk. The substance use policy for your business and the consequences for violating it should be in concert with the nature of the work performed.

HR leaders are essential in establishing a drug-free work environment and managing employees with SUD. Developing substance use policies and helping employees with SUD to find resources are challenging responsibilities. But by training managers to recognize the possible warning signs and behavioral characteristics of substance misuse and changing how your company talks about drug and alcohol misuse, you can develop effective practices for managing employees with SUD that safeguard your business.

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