

Substance abusers — and you

Alcohol consumption and drug use are considered to be personal issues — but they become a major concern in the workplace when they affect safety and job performance.

Abuse of these substances costs employers through absenteeism and sick pay. Abusers hurt themselves and their families if they lose their job as a result of their actions.

But that's not all.

Alertness and accurate, quick reflexes are a must in many workplaces. Impairment of these qualities can cause serious accidents, and interfere with the accuracy and efficiency of work.

Other ways substance abuse can cause problems at work include:

- after-effects (hangover, withdrawal) affecting job performance.
- preoccupation with obtaining and using substances while at work.
- illegal activities at work, such as selling illicit drugs to other employees.
- psychological or stress-related effects due to substance abuse by a family member, friend or co-worker.

Social and health problems affect people at all levels of an organization, but if those problems aren't resolved, some will turn to alcohol or drugs (and even drugs obtained through prescription can interfere with job performance). The danger arises when an individual can't think clearly or becomes distracted, which can lead to accidents.

There also are work-related factors that can lead to substance abuse. Among them:

- high stress
- low job satisfaction



- long hours or irregular shifts
- fatigue
- repetitious duties
- periods of inactivity or boredom
- isolation
- remote or irregular supervision
- easy access to substances.

There are certain times of the year when one should be especially aware of alcohol and drug consumption. During the dark and dreary days of winter, some people experience a sense of depression or seasonal affected disorder (SAD). They may turn to drugs or alcohol in the mistaken belief this will relieve the symptoms.

The holiday season, with increased social activity or added financial stress, leads some people to misuse drugs or alcohol.

Here are the most commonly abused substances and their effects:

Alcohol (beer, wine, spirits): impaired judgement, slowed reflexes, impaired motor function, sleepiness or drowsiness, coma, overdose may be fatal

Cannabis (marijuana, hashish): distorted

sense of time, impaired memory, impaired coordination

Depressants (sleeping medicines, sedatives, some tranquillizers): inattention, slowed reflexes, depression, impaired balance, drowsiness, coma, overdose may be fatal

Hallucinogens (LSD, PCP, mescaline): inattention, sensory illusions, hallucinations, disorientation, psychosis

Inhalants (hydrocarbons, solvents, gasoline): intoxication similar to alcohol, dizziness, headache

Opiates (morphine, heroin, codeine, some prescription pain medications): loss of interest, "nodding." If used by injection, the sharing of needles may spread Hepatitis B, or C and HIV/AIDS.

Stimulants (cocaine, amphetamines —including 'crystal meth'): elevated mood, overactivity, tension/anxiety, rapid heartbeat, constriction of blood vessels

If you don't have difficulty with any of these, good. But what if a co-worker does? Should you just ignore the situation? Perhaps you would rather avoid conflict and not cause problems.

However, with your own safety and that of your fellow employees at risk, you are part of the problem if you cover for the mistakes and poor productivity of a drinker or drug user.

Don't allow the situation to continue. Talk to your supervisor, and if you are uncomfortable about going into detail, simply suggest there might be a problem.

While it might be impossible to completely safeguard against substance problems, there are a number of things employers and employees can do to reduce the threat.

Turning a blind eye isn't one of them.

Substance Abuse

The Quiz

These questions are meant to help you remember what was discussed today — not to test your patience or challenge your intelligence. The answers are at the bottom of the page. Cover them up, and complete the quiz as quickly as you can.



Hold These Thoughts

Workplaces are encouraged to establish a procedure or policy so that help can be provided in a professional and consistent manner. It is important for supervisors and managers to have a resource or procedure that they can rely on if the need arises. Employees need to know that everyone will be treated the same way. Pre-planning, as for many other occupational health and safety issues, is the best way to avoid confusion and frustration in times that are already difficult.

In addition, managers and supervisors should be educated in how to recognize and deal with substance abuse issues and employees should be offered educational programs.

A company substance abuse policy should emphasize that the program is confidential and be jointly created by both labour and management.

Elements of the policy would include:

- statement of the purpose and objectives of the program
- definition of substance abuse
- statement of who is covered by the policy and/or program
- statement of the employee's rights to confidentiality
- that arrangements have been made for employee education (e.g., a substance-free awareness program)
- that arrangements have been made for training employees, supervisors, and others in identifying impaired behaviour and substance abuse.
- provision for assisting chronic substance abusers
- outline of how to deal with impaired workers
- if necessary, statement of under what circumstances drug or alcohol testing will be conducted
- provision for disciplinary actions.

- 1 Problems with alcohol consumption and drug use aren't just a personal issue.
True False
- 2 Can substance abuse by someone else cause a person to suffer psychological or stress-related difficulty?
Yes No
- 3 Which of these are work-related factors that can lead to substance abuse:
A. Low job satisfaction
B. Fatigue
C. Isolation
D. Remote or irregular supervision
E. All of the above
- 4 There are no times of the year when alcohol and drug problems can become more prevalent.
True False
- 5 Which of these is not a commonly abused substance:
A. Depressant
B. Alcohol
C. Deodorant
D. Opiate
E. Stimulant
- 6 Do inhalants cause intoxication similar to alcohol?
Yes No
- 7 You are part of the problem if you cover up the mistakes and poor productivity of a drinker or drug user.
True False
- 8 Does your workplace provide access to an employee assistance program for those with substance abuse problems?
Yes No Don't Know

ANSWERS: 1. True, 2. Yes, 3. E., 4. False, 5. C., 6. Yes, 7. True, 8. Your answer

Talks Zone — Inbox Safety Talks is published by Smart Workplace Inc. www.smartworkplace.ca. All rights reserved ©. This Safety Talk is licensed to ONE supervisor and may be copied for use within his/her department only. No part of this publication is to be distributed without first obtaining the correct software license or written permission from the Publisher. Site licenses are available on request.

Safety Meeting For the Record



Date of Meeting: _____

Topic: _____

Location: _____

Department: _____

Start Time: _____ Finish Time: _____

Meeting Leader: _____

In Attendance:

Tips for Safety Meeting Leaders

Reach conclusion or agreement. A safety meeting usually seems more satisfactory if you agree on a course of action. This action can be to improve or correct a situation. Make plans to get whatever information is needed to resolve a question. It is very important that you provide answers to employees' questions as soon as possible. Even if the answers are unpopular, at least you've taken the trouble to find them out.

Get your people involved. Ask them for a short presentation about safety in relation to their particular work task. There's no stress about them needing to conduct huge amounts of

research, because they know their job. Give them a time frame and allow them to be as imaginative and 'out there' as they want to be. It's during these times you'll hear 'pearls'. The number of workers who have good ideas on improving safety, but haven't spoken up just might surprise you.

Credit where it's due. Employees who have shown initiative by asking questions or coming up with good ideas should be given a word of praise either at the meeting or when you pass their workstations.

Note: TalksZone safety meetings are not intended to take the place of your own safety procedures. Always consult and/or review your procedures before attempting any work.