

Spotting Alcohol Problems

Does someone under your supervision have an untreated drinking problem?

If so, you may have seen that your team member isn't doing his best work. You probably already know the problem can be dangerous or disruptive. Since four out of five people who are addicted to alcohol or who use it in risky ways are in the workforce, chances are high that at some point you will have an employee with this problem. It could be a younger worker who binges on weekends, or an older worker who abuses alcohol to escape stress or an unhappy relationship.

Company business?

Still, drinking isn't illegal, and you might think that it's none of your business, especially if it occurs off-site or during nonwork hours. But drinking problems rarely contain themselves so neatly; even hangovers and other aftereffects of drinking can affect work performance. Risky drinkers (9.1 percent of working people between the ages of 18 and 49) pose risks to themselves, their families, their co-workers and their place of employment. Up to 40 percent of industrial fatalities and 47 percent of industrial injuries can be linked to alcohol use. One out of five employees say that the alcohol problems of people they work with have caused them to redo work or to cover for the drinker.

Recognizing alcohol abuse

Alcohol abuse is a pattern of drinking in which, during the course of a year, a person:

- fails to fulfill major work, school or home responsibilities
- drinks in dangerous situations, such as while driving or operating machinery
- has recurring alcohol-related legal problems
- continues to drink even though the drinking is having a negative impact on family or other personal relationships

Reduce the impact of drinking problems

To reduce the impact of drinking problems among employees, you can:

learn more about alcohol problems and overcome your reluctance to get involved
facilitate the identification of problems among employees through confidential alcohol screening
help employees turn to company resources when they need treatment
work with problem drinkers as they return to work if they have taken time off for treatment.

Recent practices such as pre-employment testing of illicit drugs can mask alcohol issues, leading some managers to believe they've covered the bases, consequently giving them a false sense of security. Managers may believe that they are preemptively

eliminating addiction problems, when in fact they are neglecting alcoholism, which can take years to develop.

One way to determine the likely extent of alcohol problems in your company is to use the Web tool www.alcoholcostcalculator.org . The calculator generates a custom report for your industry and lists strategies for making your workplace safer, healthier and more productive.

Help employees recover from alcoholism

Many people still believe that alcoholism and less severe drinking disorders are the result of personal failings. But medical experts, scientists and the many people who have recovered from alcohol problems know that alcoholism is a treatable chronic illness, much like asthma, high blood pressure or diabetes. Treatment for alcohol problems can be as effective as it is for these illnesses. The earlier a treatment program is begun, the easier it is to prevent escalating problems.

Confidential alcohol screening can be conducted for employees as part of an employee assistance program (EAP), resulting in referrals to appropriate treatment resources if indicated.

In most cases, problem drinkers need professional help to stop or reduce their alcohol use. Keep information flowing so that employees know what help they can get. Encourage your company to maintain an effective EAP. A strong program can be a crucial gateway to treatment because it leaves the decision to pursue treatment up to the employee.

For more information about how you can address drinking problems among employees, contact your EAP and check out the online resources on what businesses can do to address problem drinking at www.ensuringsolutions.org .

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