



Complex issues. Clear Solutions.

When an employee has an addiction problem

Your role:

- It is not to diagnose or counsel. In fact, it is unethical for someone in a relationship with power over another to engage in this type of help.
- Understand that the issue is not about you or the employee's respect for you. It is a problem the employee has with substance and your need for a safe, productive employee.
- Have a list of resources both within your organization and in the community to offer to the employee and let him or her know that you are not the best person to help them with personal or health related issues. Assure them that you will do all you can to help them with work-related issues.
- Listening is not the same as counseling. Be open to having the employee explain their situation and their perspective, but resist offering advice about their personal life or their treatment.
- Collaborate with individuals on solutions that allow them to be successful at work. Stay focused on the employee's work related objectives rather than discussions about character or personality.
- You are not expected to solve their problems yourself. In fact, it is much more effective to have people come up with their own solutions and measurable goals. Their commitment to their own ideas will always be greater than their commitment to your ideas.
- Stay calm and resist lecturing or being defensive.
- Avoid using derogatory terms, such as pothead, stoner, alkie, wino, lush, junkie, etc. Use terms such as "person with substance issues".
- Try to see the person behind the addiction.
- You may need a lot of patience when helping an employee with addiction. Find the support you need so that you can support and guide this employee.

Adjust your thinking:

- People with addiction problems are not weak, they are ill.
- Addiction is an illness, with symptoms that may be difficult to control (just the way someone with bronchitis may have an uncontrollable cough).
- The behaviours you see are symptoms of the illness. The person with addiction does not have the same clear choices about their addictive behaviour as does someone without addiction.
- Denial and lying about the addictive behaviour are symptoms of addiction and a strategy to reduce the fear of rejection and failure. Try not to take this as a personal insult.
- Consequences at work can provide the employee with meaningful incentive to work towards recovery.
- Addiction and mental illness often co-occur. Recovery for both is possible, and takes a lot of hard work. Relapse is also part of the illness and may occur at any time, but particularly when stressors increase.



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- The addictive behaviour may be an attempt to cover up feelings, thoughts or memories that are too painful to deal with. It may also be an attempt to self-medicate to cope with and reduce the symptoms of mental illnesses such as anxiety or depression.
- There is a story shared by one individual about how 29 different people reached out to help him throughout his years of addiction, many did so multiple times. Each person felt that their efforts were unsuccessful until the 29th person convinced him to accept help. You don't know if you are the 1st or the 28th to offer help, but the individual experiencing the addiction said every one of those people made a difference in the end. It was in reflecting on the people who never gave up on him that he found the strength to finally seek recovery.

What to do:

- Review your organization's policies about the consequences of substance use while on the job.
- Ensure all employees acknowledge an understanding of these policies.
- Document all behaviours related to workplace performance objectively. Resist writing down your suspicions or assumptions. Stick to the observable facts and the impact on performance. A diabetic reaction can look like inebriation and some neurological conditions can mimic drug use.
- Have a discussion without criticism or judgment of the individual, about the stated consequences for behaviour at work, and workplace performance issues. Provide copies of the policy to the employee and document your discussion.
- Remember that manipulative behaviour, such as denial and lying, is part of the illness, and generally not intended to hurt or harm you or anyone else. If the lying or manipulative behaviour does not relate directly to performance, resist engaging in a debate about it. Remember that it is a strategy to reduce fear of rejection or failure.
- Write clearly-stated and measurable job expectations for the employee. Make sure the he or she understands the expectations. You may need to explain the expectations more than once.
- Write a clearly-stated path of discipline. Make sure the employee understands the path. You may need to explain it more than once.
- Offer assistance every time you meet with the employee. If the employee requires treatment refer to health services.
- Be sensitive to issues of alcohol use at workplace sponsored events or in the social fabric of the workplace community. For example, the focus of seasonal parties in December is often alcohol. Downplay or eliminate alcohol at these events. Going for a drink after work may be difficult for the employee with alcohol addiction. If this is a regular social practice at your workplace, consider alternate activities.
- Seek advice from HR or legal counsel if the behaviours continue and dismissal or discipline is being considered.