



MANAGING SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN THE WORKPLACE

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The availability and abuse of substances is becoming an increasing problem in the workplace. We regularly have clients call saying they think one of their employees is under the influence of alcohol, or an employee has told them they think someone has been smoking dope, or that they are seeing irrational behaviour that is out of character in an employee.

Alcohol and drug abuse not only affects the individual concerned, but also endangers the circle of people surrounding the abuser, and has the potential to destroy the person's career and relationships. Abuse impairs the brain's proper function. It reduces the ability to make sound judgments and decisions, and increases the likelihood of mistakes through the loss of spatial awareness and control of the body. As substance abusers become more unreliable, their absenteeism increases while their productivity diminishes. While these issues will have a negative impact on any workplace over time, they are particularly damaging in industries where employees' physical safety may be at risk from others, such as in construction or manufacturing.

In terms of spotting the problem, those who have alcohol or drug problems are likely to be identified through a drop in performance, increased absenteeism, or behaviour that requires disciplinary procedures. Their behaviour may appear erratic or out of character, they may have mood swings, become confused and irritable, develop relationship problems with co-workers, take extended lunch breaks, or they may disappear inexplicably at odd times throughout the day.

Generally employers don't know how to begin to address the issue of substance abuse and most don't have policies or procedures in place to assist with the management of the problem.

Recently a client called and told us that one of their most productive and diligent employees had started to take a lot of days off work, and when she came to work she smelled of alcohol. Our advice was to talk to her in a non confrontational way to find out if everything was ok and if there was anything she needed to talk about. The employee broke down, admitted she had been drinking heavily as her husband had left her and she was devastated. The employer was able to talk through her issues, refer her to their alcohol and drug policy and was able to provide the employee with counselling. For the sake of a conversation and the investment in some counselling the employer is now back performing to her usual standard.

So what can you put in place to outline your policy and raise awareness on the issue of drug and alcohol abuse?

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- Implement a drug-free workplace policy including a list of prohibited substances, an explanation of the consequences for violating the policy and an overview of the help that is available to those who feel they have a problem.
- Provide managers and supervisors with training on how to identify the signs of substance abuse.
- Provide employees with drug and alcohol education and information.
- Outline the potential health and safety dangers to substance abusers and their colleagues. Encourage early identification of employees at risk.
- Offer advice and assistance to those who feel they have a substance problem. This may include medical assistance, counselling services, or an employee assistance programme.

By knowing the signs of substance abuse and putting some simple policies and processes in place employers can enhance performance and productivity while promoting safety and wellbeing in the workplace.