

Promoting a Drug-free Workplace: What Can I Do?

A safe, healthy and drug-free workplace is everybody's responsibility. This article offers steps you can take to help a co-worker who may have an alcohol or drug problem. By knowing what to do (and what not to do), employees can play a powerful role in improving workplace safety and encouraging co-workers with alcohol or drug problems to seek help.

Most of us know someone, perhaps a family member, friend or co-worker, who has been affected by alcohol or drug abuse in some way. Though some of the signs may vary by drug of choice, what you see that person doing and how you interact with her is often the same, regardless of the substance being used. Both on and off the job, symptoms of alcohol or drug use may be physical (chills, smell of alcohol, sweating, weight loss, physical deterioration); emotional (increased aggression, anxiety, burnout, denial, depression, paranoia); and/or behavioral (excessive talking, impaired coordination, irritability, lack of energy, limited attention span, poor motivation). It is important to note, however, that if an employee displays these symptoms, it does not necessarily mean she has a substance abuse problem.

Signs that substance use may be a workplace hazard include:

- creating mishaps, being careless and repeatedly making mistakes
- damaging equipment or property
- being involved in numerous accidents
- displaying careless actions in the operation of hazardous materials or equipment
- being unreliable, not being where she should be
- showing a lack of detail on performing routine job duties
- being unwilling to follow directions and being argumentative
- giving elaborate, unbelievable excuses for not fulfilling responsibilities
- not carrying one's load
- taking unnecessary risks
- disregarding safety for self and others

Don't enable the person

For your own safety, it is important that you not tolerate such conduct by a co-worker using alcohol or drugs. However, this can be a challenge—sometimes it may seem easier to ignore the problem and unwittingly enable the employee's behavior to continue. For example, you may cover up for a co-worker by providing alibis or doing his work; develop reasons why his continued use of alcohol or drugs is understandable; or just avoid contact altogether. Trying to take responsibility by throwing out the person's drugs or making idle threats also tends to be ineffective.

How you can help

Worker alcohol and drug use cannot be taken lightly, especially in environments where workers rely on each other for safety. While supervisors can confront workers whose behavior affects their job performance, co-workers may be able to help before this occurs. However, it is important for employees to understand that it is not their responsibility to diagnose problems. Rather, they should observe behavior and focus on safety. Though notifying a supervisor may eventually be necessary, a co-worker may have significant influence using the right approach. If you suspect someone has a problem:

Identify with the person and show concern. Say you have noticed a change in behavior and express your concern for her safety and that of other workers.

Describe your observation of her behavior, using specific days and/or times rather than saying “you always” and other similar phrases.

Connect the behavior to the alcohol or drug use (or suspected use).

Urge the person to get help and offer information about how to get it.

Your employee assistance program (EAP) provides confidential, short-term counseling and referral services as a benefit to employees.

Tell the person you will no longer hide the problem for her, but do not make idle threats. Be willing and able to follow through.

Explain how the person’s substance abuse affects you and others at work.

Reconfirm your concern. You do not need to get him to admit he has a substance abuse problem. You must stand your ground with your co-worker, be consistent with your actions and be willing to follow through on any threats you make.

It is important to note, however, that even after confronting a co-worker using these steps, he may still be unwilling to accept or acknowledge the alcohol or drug problem. When you have done all you can and the person’s behavior is such that it directly affects you and your ability to do your job, it may be appropriate to involve others. This may mean taking your concerns about safety to a supervisor, who may have more options through the workplace to help the person get assistance.

Source: U.S. Department of Labor

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