

Drinking in the Workplace

Alcohol Deaths Exceed Opiate Overdoses

According to the *Washington Post*, one in eight Americans, or 12.7% of the US population, meets the diagnostic criteria for alcohol use disorder. It can be risky to bring these issues to someone's attention, but it may also be what the person needs to help them begin to make some changes. And as noted, alcohol abuse is a more common problem than many people might think. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 88,000 people a year die of alcohol-related causes, *more than twice the annual death toll of opiate overdoses*.

Many Drinkers Also Use Other Drugs

This is certainly not to say that opiates and other illicit drugs aren't a problem. The National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAA) points out that *drug and alcohol dependence often go hand in hand*. Research shows that people who are dependent on alcohol are much more likely than the general population to use drugs, and people with drug dependence are much more likely to drink alcohol. For example, of 248 alcoholics seeking treatment, 64 percent met the criteria for a drug use disorder at some point in their lifetime.

Consequently, while this article focuses on alcoholism, it is important to point out that a problem drinker (or suspected problem drinker) may also be using illicit drugs, and to take that into account when seeking assistance for this individual.

Common Drinking Problems

The following are the most common types of drinking problems:

❖ **Binge drinking** – This is typically defined as the consumption of five or more drinks at one sitting for men, and three or more drinks at one sitting for women. Binge drinking is most common among young adults 18-21. (**Editor's note:** Binge drinking is an overlooked drinking problem discussed in this month's cover story in *EAR*.)

❖ **Alcohol abuse** – Abuse often results in impaired performance on the job, neglect of child-care or other responsibilities, legal difficulties, and alcohol consumption in dangerous circumstances such as while driving.

❖ **Alcohol dependence** – This is a chronic and often progressive disease that includes a strong need to drink despite repeated social or interpersonal problems such as losing a job or deteriorating relationships with friends, family, and co-workers. Alcohol dependence – or alcoholism – is the most severe alcohol problem and is characterized by three of the seven symptoms listed below, over a one-year period:

- **Neglect of activities** – Important social, occupational, or recreational activities are eliminated or reduced because of alcohol use.
- **Excessive use** – Alcohol is consumed in larger amounts over a longer period than intended.
- **Impaired control** – Ongoing, unsuccessful efforts to cut down or control alcohol consumption.
- **Persistent use** – Alcohol consumption is continued despite having a persistent or recurrent physical or psychological problem that is likely caused or made worse by alcohol.
- **Large amounts of time spent in alcohol-related activities** – A great deal of time is spent in activities to obtain, use, or recover from the effects of alcohol.
- **Withdrawal** – Withdrawal symptoms, such as nausea, sweating, shakiness, and anxiety are present when alcohol use is stopped after a period of heavy drinking.
- **Tolerance** – This is the need for increasing amounts of alcohol in order to feel its effects.

The Workplace Suffers in Significant Ways

According to the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, a leading treatment center and recovery

community, one-third of employees thought a co-worker's job performance was affected by drug or alcohol abuse.

Co-workers may feel compassion for the individual and cover for him, especially at first, but ultimately they may come to resent this person. Interestingly, co-workers are *not* likely to bring up the subject with the individual. In fact, Hazelden Betty Ford reported that fewer than one in five had discussed the problem with the employee and his or her manager or supervisor.

This doesn't mean that supervisors don't have a clue what is going on. According to a Hazelden Betty Ford workplace addiction survey, over 60% of HR professionals said they believe addiction significantly affects employees in their workplaces.

In fact, the National Institute on Health estimates that alcohol use costs companies **\$27 billion** annually in lost productivity, and some estimates are even higher than that. Put another way, CEOs estimate that the use of alcohol and other drugs cost them 1% to 10% of payroll.

Alcohol also has a tremendous impact on individuals. For instance, the non-alcoholic family of an alcoholic employee use 10 times as much sick leave as families in which alcoholism is not present. In addition, individuals with alcoholism or other drinking problems suffer lost wages ranging from 1.5% to nearly 19% compared to non-drinkers. Alcohol also plays a role in nearly half (41%) of traffic fatalities and 50% of homicides.

Signs and Symptoms

Despite the problems that alcohol and other drugs can cause in the workplace, there remains a surprising lack of information about steps that can be taken to help resolve the situation. For example, over half (54%) of respondents to the previously mentioned survey reported not knowing how to identify addiction.

It should be pointed out that *work performance*, not the clinical diagnosis of a drinking or other drug abuse problem, is the responsibility of the manager or supervisor. A key part of every supervisor's job is to remain alert to changes in employee performance and to work with the employee.

Therefore, the following signs and symptoms should only be considered as guidelines to a *possible* alcohol or other drug problem – not as proof. Conclusions should always be based on *facts*, not assumptions.

Performance

- Increase in mistakes or inconsistency in quality of work;
- Poor concentration;
- Decrease in productivity;
- Increased absenteeism;
- Unexplained disappearances from work;
- Poor judgment;
- Increased risk taking;
- Disregard for safety;
- Extended lunch and other breaks; and
- Leaving work early.

Behavior

- Financial problems;
- Avoiding family, friends, and co-workers;
- Complaints about personal problems;
- Deterioration in physical appearance;
- Changes in attitude;
- Borrowing money from friends or co-workers;
- Stealing items from work or friends;
- Vague physical complaints; and
- Association with known drug users.

Additional Signs

The following are some additional signs of possible alcohol abuse:

- Odor on breath;
- Difficulty focusing, glazed eyes;
- Uncharacteristically passive behavior;
- Combative or argumentative behavior;
- Unexplained bruises and accidents;
- Absence on Mondays;
- Irritability;
- Flushed skin and slurred speech;
- Loss of memory or blackouts;
- Impaired personal relationships;
- Consumption of alcohol becomes main point of social and professional activities; and
- Drinking alcohol to get over a hangover.

Accessing Treatment

Even if the individual and his or her supervisor are aware of drinking or other drug problems, directing the employee into treatment is yet another barrier. More than one third (36%) of respondents to the previously mentioned survey said they don't know how to get treatment. This is surprising since most (89%) of survey respondents believe that addiction treatment programs are effective in helping employees beat addiction.

What can be done to help bridge this gap? The following are some ideas:

❖ **Don't assume that the individual will seek treatment.** Surveys reveal that many employees won't seek treatment on their own. One possible reason lies in the fact that men typically derive a great deal of their self-esteem from work. As a result, many men will try to keep any work-related problems a secret. Therefore, it's important that the employees know that help is available. Ask something like, "*Can I tell you about EAP benefits?*"

❖ **Increase awareness.** Do managers and supervisors understand that EAPs are available to help employees with addiction problems? Tell them what the EAP is about and how it can help.

❖ **Use absenteeism as an opportunity to speak with the employee.** Since absenteeism is common with addicted employees, take advantage of this opportunity to confront the individual in a straightforward, yet caring manner. Ask questions such as: "*You don't look well. Are you seeing anyone about it?*" Or you might try, "*Your productivity has really slipped lately. This is serious.*"

Is Treatment Too Expensive?

Let's assume you've identified an employee with an alcohol or other substance abuse problem, and he or she is willing to seek treatment. What then? It's crucial to note that as opposed to firing the individual, treatment can actually *save* companies money.

The Chevron corporation estimates that it **saves \$10** for every dollar it spends to treat employees with substance abuse problems. Then, of course, there is the high cost to employers caused by lost productivity, absenteeism, etc. Treatment also benefits society. Before treatment, roughly 37% of patients report having been arrested, but after treatment, the number drops substantially, to about 6%.

"People sometimes make bad decisions, but if they have the right skill sets and work ethic, they could be an asset to a business if they get professional help," notes Helen Jones-Kelley, executive director of the Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services Board of Montgomery County, Ohio.

The Case of 'Kate'

Kate (who asked that her last name not be used to protect her identity), was an alcoholic who abused cocaine and marijuana when she worked for an auto manufacturer in Ohio in the 1980s and 1990s.

She said what started off as a drink at lunch escalated to a point where she operated vehicles and machinery drunk. She wrecked company property. She started leaving for lunch and not returning. Her work attendance was terrible, and her job performance suffered.

Kate, the former addict who has been sober for nearly 20 years, said companies should support employees who want to get help for substance abuse. *She sought help from her company's EAP, which helps workers with drug abuse and other personal problems.* She was able to overcome her addiction through Alcoholics Anonymous and other support programs.

Summary

Alcohol has a huge impact on individuals' lives and companies' bottom lines. Organizations that haven't addressed the issue need to do so, and businesses that have should reassess what they're doing to ensure that their programs and/or policies are working. In either case, the EAP is in a perfect position to help. ■

Additional sources: National Association of Addiction Treatment Providers; and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Social Drinking also has Impact



“Joe,” a worker at ABC Widget, has a few too many drinks at a wedding, gets home late, has trouble getting to sleep, and thus arrives at work on Monday slightly late and has a hard time concentrating all day. While this scenario might seem harmless, an employee like Joe who has a few too many drinks during an occasional weekend party is probably also contributing to companies’ hefty, multi-billion dollar tab.

Joe isn’t an alcoholic, and he wouldn’t even be classified as having a drinking problem. However, a study on alcohol in the workplace revealed that the majority of alcohol-related work problems are actually caused by employees who occasionally drink too much on a Sunday or a work night.

These results are similar to other additional findings, indicating that casual drinkers, not alcoholics, cause the majority of drink driving-related accidents and fatalities.

This isn’t to suggest that alcoholics don’t cause serious problems! Certainly, they do! Rather, the intent is to point out that a potentially even larger problem stems from individuals who don’t drink very often, but when they do – and because so many people are social drinkers – it adds up to a big problem nonetheless.

People considered occasional drinkers cause 29% more incidents such as absenteeism, tardi-

ness, less than acceptable work, or arguments with co-workers, than employees who said they don’t drink at all. This is because even occasional excessive alcohol use upsets sleep and decreases concentration and in turn productivity, even if the person doesn’t have the classic hangover symptoms of headache and nausea.

What’s Next?

Companies shouldn’t take these findings as a mandate to delve into the private lives of usually productive employees. Rather, employers should examine their overall attitudes toward alcohol and how this part of corporate culture may influence their workers’ behavior.

In addition to examining attitudes toward alcohol and the company’s corporate culture, employers need to work with EAPs to start employee awareness campaigns to address the issue. Knowledge is an important part of any awareness program.

Employers and employees should also know what constitutes an alcohol problem (*see the previously listed signs and symptoms in the main article of this Brown Bagger*), as well as learning the different types of alcohol problems. ■

Source: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA).