

## **Workplace Impact of Drug and Alcohol Use/Abuse**

(taken from the Department of Labor e-laws Drug-Free Work Place Advisor <http://www.dol.gov/elaws/asp/drugfree/employee/screen69.asp>)

Alcohol abuse and the use of illegal drugs are serious workplace problems. Nearly three quarters of those who use illegal drugs also work, and alcohol remains the leading drug of abuse as one in every ten people in the U.S. has an alcohol problem. People don't check their substance abuse problems at the door when they enter the workplace. Workers who abuse alcohol and other drugs affect everyone around them. Substance abuse can affect all segments of the workforce ranging from employees with tedious repetitive tasks to managers under stress.

The Department of Transportation and other Federal agencies require testing employees for illegal drugs and alcohol. Transportation industry employees whose jobs are designated as "safety-sensitive" are subject to random testing. The substances tested for are alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, amphetamines, opiates and PCP. A positive drug or alcohol test can result in the loss of a job or in some cases a career.

### **Employee Health**

Substance abusers tend to neglect their nutrition, sleep and other health needs, and substance abuse depresses the immune system.

#### **Impact:**

- Higher health benefit usage
- Increased use of sick time
- More absenteeism and tardiness

### **Safety:**

Common effects of the use of alcohol and other drugs are impairments in vision, hearing, attention span, muscle coordination, alertness and mental acuity.

#### **Impact:**

- More accidents
- More workers' compensation claims

### **Productivity:**

Employees who abuse alcohol or use drugs can be physically and mentally impaired on the job. Substance abuse interferes with job satisfaction and the motivation to do a good job.

#### **Impact:**

- Reduced output
- Increased errors
- Lower quality
- Reduced customer satisfaction

### **Decision Making:**

Employees who use alcohol and/or drugs often make poor decisions and have a distorted perception of their ability.

#### **Impact:**

- Reduced innovation
- Reduced creativity
- Reduced competitiveness
- Poor daily and strategic decisions

### **Morale:**

The presence of an employee with drug and/or alcohol problems places a strain on relationships between coworkers. Organizations that appear to condone drug use create the image that the organization does not care.

#### **Impact:**

- Higher turnover
- Diminished quality
- Reduced team effort

### **Security:**

Employees with drug and/or alcohol problems often have financial difficulties, and employees using illegal drugs may conduct illegal activities in the workplace.

#### **Impact:**

- Theft
- Law Enforcement involvement

## Organizational Image and Community Relations

Accidents, lawsuits and other incidents may receive media attention.

### Impact:

- Reduced trust and confidence
- Reduced ability to attract high quality employees
- Decreased business/financial well being

## Understanding Addiction

Employees with drug and/or alcohol problems often are unhappy with their lives, but fail to realize that their use of alcohol and/or drugs is a major contributing factor to their unhappiness. The struggle with addiction is characterized by repeated failures to control use, an increase in the number and severity of problems caused by use and the need for greater amounts of the substance to achieve the desired effect. However, not everyone who uses alcohol or experiments with illegal drugs becomes addicted. Formal attempts to standardize definitions used to describe alcohol and drug disorders have not been entirely successful for a number of reasons, including the fact that the differences between *use*, *abuse* and *addiction* are not easily recognized based on isolated observable behaviors that individuals may exhibit. Nevertheless, the following descriptions of use, abuse and addiction are used by health care professionals who specialize in drug and alcohol disorders and reflect the progression that may occur from normal, non-problematic use to abuse and addiction.

### Use

Alcohol and other drugs may be used in a socially accepted or medically authorized manner to modify or control mood or state of mind. Examples include having a drink with friends or taking an anti-anxiety agency as prescribed by a physician. Described below are different ways that people use alcohol and other drugs without necessarily becoming addicted.

- **Experimental use** - Out of curiosity and/or at the urging of peers, individuals may try drinking or using drugs illegally. If the illegal drug use is not repeated, or discontinues after a short time, such experimentation may not be problematic. Likewise, deciding to drink alcoholic beverages after early experimentation is not problematic for most adults.
- **Social/Recreational use** - Drinking alcoholic beverages is permitted in American society, and some excessive use may even be condoned. If use doesn't cause problems for the user, or those around him/her, most people would consider such use to be social or recreational. Some use marijuana in a similar manner--only in certain social or recreational situations and without immediate adverse consequences. However, marijuana use is illegal, except in a few states.
- **As a stress reliever** - Many people use alcohol or other drugs to help them cope with pressure or stress. If this type of use is infrequent and doesn't create more stress or other difficulties for the individual or those around him, it may not lead to addiction. However, alcoholism and drug addiction often begin with relief drinking.

### Abuse

The use of a substance to modify or control mood or state of mind in a manner that is illegal or harmful to oneself or others is considered problematic use, or abuse. Examples of potential consequences of harmful use are:

- Accidents or injuries
- Blackouts
- Legal problems
- Poor job performance
- Family problems
- Health problems

### Addiction

A number of individuals occasionally use or abuse alcohol or drugs without becoming addicted, but for many abuse continues despite repeated attempts to return to more social or controlled use and leads to addiction. Addiction is characterized by the repeated, compulsive seeking or use of a substance despite adverse social, psychological and/or physical consequences. A wide range of substances, both legal and illegal, can be abused addictively. Addiction is often, but not always, accompanied by *physical dependence*, a *withdrawal syndrome* and *tolerance*. Physical dependence is defined as a physiological state of adaptation to a substance such that the absence of the substance produces symptoms of withdrawal. A withdrawal syndrome consists of a predictable group of signs and symptoms that result from abrupt removal of, or rapid decrease in the regular dosage of, a psychoactive substance. Tolerance is a state in which a drug produces a diminishing biologic or behavioral response, which means higher doses are needed to produce the same effect that the user experienced initially.

Addiction to alcohol and other drugs is:

- **Chronic** - Once you have developed an addiction, you will always have to deal with it. You may manage to stop using alcohol or other drugs for significant periods of time, but for most the disease doesn't disappear but rather goes into remission. Should you attempt to resume "normal" use, you will rapidly return to addictive, out of control use and abuse.
- **Progressive** - Addiction gets worse over time. With some drugs, the decline is rapid; with others, like alcohol, it can be

more gradual, but it does get worse. Alcohol and other drugs cause a biochemical change in the nervous system that can persist even after the substance leaves the blood. Repeated use causes progressive damage.

- **Primary** - Addiction is not just a symptom of some underlying psychological problem, a developmental stage or a reaction to stress. Once your use of alcohol or drugs has become an addiction, the addiction itself needs to be medically treated as the primary illness.
- **Terminal** - Addiction to alcohol and/or other drugs often leads to disease and possibly death.
- **Characterized by denial** - One of the most disturbing and confusing aspects of addiction is that it is characterized by denial. The user denies that his/her use is out of control or that it is causing any problems at home or on the job. The user often seems to be the last to know that his/her life is out of control. There are effective strategies employed by professionals for helping to break through this denial, which must be overcome before treatment can take place.

### Risk of Addiction

Many factors can lead to developing a problem with alcohol and/or other drugs. Unfortunately, we really are not able to predict who can drink socially or who will develop an addiction. We do, however, have some evidence of what types of behavior or history can increase the risk of developing a serious problem.

- **Addiction is a family disease.** Some people with a history of substance abuse in their family are more susceptible to developing problems with addiction. Children of alcoholics or addicts are three times as likely to develop problems. If both parents are addicts or alcoholics, the risk increases to five times as great. This is due to heredity as well as learned behavior. It is important for parents to realize that children learn much more from watching their behavior than listening to their advice.
- **Prior abuse of alcohol and other drugs has a great impact on developing future problems.** A pattern of abuse develops and can lead to addiction and psychological reliance on drugs and/or alcohol. This can be a slow progression for some and a rapid decline for others. Research demonstrates that the later in life an individual first drinks alcohol or uses other drugs, the less likely he or she will be to progress to problem use.
- **Other contributing factors.** Some people abuse alcohol and drugs as part of a self-destructive lifestyle. Other people start to use substances to seek relief from depression or crisis in their lives. Although some fortunate individuals never develop serious problems and use diminishes or ceases once the precipitating events change, others develop a serious problem before they even realize it.

### Signs and Symptoms

Signs that someone is developing a problem with alcohol and/or drugs cover a wide range and many of them are apparent on the job. Unfortunately, no one wants to believe that a friend, coworker or family member has a substance abuse problem. Subtle changes in behavior often are discounted. Changes in friends, lack of interest in old hobbies and increasing isolation are all minimized. Nonetheless, there is usually ample evidence of a problem if you are willing to recognize the connection between the behavior you observe and the drug and alcohol use.

- **Emotional**
  - Aggression
  - Burnout
  - Anxiety
  - Depression
  - Paranoia
  - Denial
- **Behavioral**
  - Slow reaction time
  - Impaired coordination
  - Slowed or slurred speech
  - Irritability
  - Excessive talking
  - Inability to sit still
  - Limited attention span
  - Poor motivation and lack of energy
- **Physical**
  - Weight loss
  - Sweating
  - Chills
  - Smell of alcohol