

Stigmatization of people with substance use disorders

Stigmatization in the Workplace

According to the 2018 World Drug Report (1) of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), About 275 million people worldwide, which is roughly 5.6 per cent of the global population aged 15–64 years, used drugs at least once during 2016. Some 31 million of people who use drugs suffer from drug use disorders, meaning that their drug use is harmful to the point where they may need treatment.

Despite the extent of this public health problem, people facing addictive disorders must face a highly stigmatizing (2) moral judgment from society as a whole, particularly with regard to people who use illicit drugs. According to World Health Organization, addiction to illicit drugs is the most stigmatizing condition (3) ; people with problematic alcohol and other drug use experience stigmatizing or discriminatory attitudes on a daily basis. These experiences can be highly distressing and can result in people feeling shame, guilt, anger, rejection and a sense of worthlessness or hopelessness which can in turn trigger further alcohol or other drug use and other forms of risky behaviours.



[More about: The consequences of addiction stigma](#)



[#QuitStigmaNow - Bringing addiction stigma to an end, a Dianova campaign](#)



People use alcohol or other drugs for various reasons: to seek pleasure, to support the difficulties of life, to improve one's performances, etc. There are a variety of models and all life histories deserve the same attention. These individual life paths are generally associated to a collective: the family, the world of school and studies, leisure, and of course the workplace. In most industrialized countries, alcohol and other drug use is increasing in the workplace as in society and no professional sector is immune to this phenomenon.

Impact of Substance Use Disorders in the Workplace

Substance use disorders among employees and their family members can be an expensive problem in the workplace. The impact of alcoholism and other drug dependence focuses on various issues including:

- Absenteeism,
- Presenteeism (employee physically present at work but less or not productive),
- Extra sick leave,
- Disability claims,
- Benefit costs,
- Insurance claims,
- Accident costs,
- Costs associated with replacing damaged equipment,
- Litigation.

In addition, various problems related to long-term substance use or acute intoxication can be detrimental to the workplace because of the following factors:

- Tardiness,
- Sleeping on the job,
- After-effects of substance use (hangover, withdrawal) affecting job performance,
- Impairment of judgment, concentration, alertness, perception, motor coordination,
- Efficacy and productivity loss,
- Misuse of equipment, theft,



- Relationships with colleagues and supervisors impaired,
- Preoccupation with obtaining and using substances while at work,
- Illegal activities at work including selling illicit drugs to other employees
- Higher turnover,
- Disciplinary procedures, etc.

The Stigma of Mental Health Disorders in the Workplace

The business environment is one of performance and productivity, so anything that might put this goal at risk is particularly frowned upon by employers. Diseases are among these unpredictable factors, yet, with the advancement of social rights and the help of insurance companies employers are now able to deal with these problems with minimal consequences for the workplace and workers. The days when a sick employee could be fired without further ado are over and that's quite a good thing. We no longer live in the 18th century!

Nevertheless, there are still diseases or conditions on which the eyes of the company are far from being benevolent. Mental health disorders are one of them.

These are disorders that cannot be seen. And in the workplace, as in families, people tend to make a quick shortcut about it: what we do not see does not exist. Just take depression. This condition is severely debilitating and those affected have enough on their plates already. Still, "normal" people look at them as if they were contagious, and many people who are depressed have to hear the same platitudes such as: "Why don't you give yourself a good kick in the rear"!





The stigma of mental health disorders is even more pervasive and entrenched in the workplace when associated with alcohol and other drug use disorders. For those affected, stigma is the main obstacle to treatment, while unfortunately, the dynamics of the workplace, corporate policies and employee status only perpetuate the problems associated with stigmatization.

A Non-existing Issue in Most Workplaces

Despite their many consequences and the fact that they concern a very large number of people, substance use disorders are a non-existing issue in many workplaces' policies.


Alcohol and other drug use disorders are often the subject of formal conversations and informal talk. In hallway conversations, next to the coffee machine, it's not uncommon to hear degrading remarks and words like "deadbeat", "junkie" or "drunk" float around the workplace and keep our struggling colleagues silent. It may be a joke, a remark about a colleague facing such problems, or a side comment made with ill intent.


This kind of conversation, coupled with daily work-related stressors and multiplied by workplace traditions of happy hours and networking events, contribute to the reason choose to stay silent about addiction and recovery at work.





Problematic Substance Use & Employment: Myths & Facts


 **Myth:** People experiencing problematic substance use don't want to work.

 **Fact:** many people experiencing problematic substance use are interested in working, like any other people. They find that work is a good reason or a motivator to address their problem.


 **Myth:** Work is too stressful for people experiencing problematic substance use issues.

 **Fact:** As with other members of our community, work improves self-esteem, adds a sense of purpose, and contributes towards recovery in positive ways for many people with substance related disorders.


 **Myth:** People experiencing problematic substance use benefit from extensive pre-vocational assessments and work readiness programmes.

 **Fact:** The best predictors of employment success for people experiencing problematic substance use and co-occurring mental illness are expressed interest in working and previous employment history. Past problematic substance use is not a consistent predictor of employment success or failure.

 **Myth:** People who are able to recover from substance related disorders are always at significant risk for relapse.

 **Fact:** Relapse of a substance related disorder is always a possibility, but employment may protect people from relapse. Employment is associated with continued recovery and relapse is associated with unemployment, housing instability, and loss of social supports.

 **Myth:** People who abuse/use substances problematically lack good working skills.

 **Fact:** Many people with substance related disorders have a variety of interests, employment histories, and core work skills that may be valuable in any job.

What Can Your Business/Organization Do?



"Even though we have had substance use problems, we can still work like everyone else"

Leonardo, in recovery from a substance use problem

It is critical for any business to prevent/decrease the use of alcohol and other drugs in the workplace, and to help those affected by substance use disorders.

Developing a non-stigmatizing, non-discriminating risk management policy in the workplace, service or workshop can be a daunting task. Such a policy involves management choices regarding job retention or reintegration (depending also on what is permitted by law) and involves anticipating the different responses given to the employees concerned.

Steps to Implement a Substance Use Policy

1- Assessing the Needs of Your Business/Organization

Employers should first examine the needs of their workplace and employees and the capacity of their workplace to address these needs. A needs assessment can be conducted through a questionnaire or a meeting or focus/discussion group with diverse workplace representatives (4).

Your needs assessment procedure should answer those four key questions:

What is the impact of problematic substance use on my workplace?

E.g., are employees in safety or security sensitive positions, do employees perform functions such as client relations or financials, what are the statistics on turnover, absenteeism, and productivity?

Is this a problem/concern in my workplace?

E.g., what is the workplace culture around problematic substance use, what do people think of those who have substance use problems?



Are we prepared if we have a problem?

E.g., do you have a drug/alcohol policy, do supervisors and employees know what to do if a colleague reveals a substance use problem? Do you have guidelines to reduce the stigma of people with mental health problems?

What resources are available for persons with substance use problems?

E.g., what supports are available for employees, what are the costs, what is available in the community?

2 – Develop a Drug & Alcohol Policy

The goal is to develop clear guidelines or policies regarding the use of alcohol and other drugs that may negatively impact the workplace. Your drug and alcohol policy should reflect the specific corporate culture and values of your workplace, the regulatory environment within which your workplace operates and the specific program needs. The objectives of the policy are:

- To promote the health, wellness and safety of employees, co-workers, families and the surrounding community;
- To communicate to employees your workplace's position on substance use;
- To provide an ongoing programme of education and awareness on alcohol and other drug use, the disorders that may arise from problematic use, and available treatment resources to employees, supervisors, managers and their families;
- To promote a non-stigmatizing work environment that enable to calmly deal with problems related to problematic substance use;
- To ensure confidentiality in all circumstances provided there is no danger of harm to other employees, family or oneself.

Note: employers may consult and use existing policy examples while ensuring to adapt them to their workplace's specific needs.



3 – Education & Awareness Programme for Employees

Employee education and awareness is a critical step in workplaces addressing problematic substance use. Areas to focus educational efforts should include:

- General information on problematic substance use and other addictive disorders such as pathological gambling;
- Prevention of problematic substance use using a comprehensive model of health in the workplace;
- Details of the problematic substance use policy in the workplace;
- The impact of problematic substance use and other addictive disorders on safety, health, personal life, work environment and work performance;
- How to report a co-worker who is showing obvious signs of intoxication or indicators of problematic use of alcohol or other drugs;
- The different types of help and supports available for employees and their families.

4 – Supervisor Training

Supervisors are a key element of successfully implementing the problematic substance use policy in your workplace. They therefore need to be trained in techniques such as detection of warning signs of substance use, active listening and non-judgmental approaches necessary to take action with concerned employees and handle possible crisis situations adequately. The training programme should include:

- Knowing the various aspects of the workplace's policy and programme on problematic substance use ;
- Being aware of legal areas, including right to confidentiality for employees, work and union contracts, laws and regulations on drug testing if part of the policy, etc.
- Recognizing signs of symptoms of potential problematic use – there are no standard indicators, but warning signs such as repeated absenteeism, frequent tardiness and lower work performance should be carefully monitored;



- Handling drug and alcohol-related crisis situations, whether occasional or frequent, including handling violent behaviours, threatening words or actions, illegal activities, etc.
- Knowing the procedures in the event of an individual problem, in particular the conditions for withdrawal or retention in work position;
Referring to appropriate resources for support and treatment;
- Reintegrating employee back to work.

5 – Supporting Employees

The problematic substance use prevention and management policy in the workplace should be grounded in a comprehensive approach aimed at supporting employees. This approach generally comprises five areas, including:

Prevention & Health Promotion

Implementing problematic use prevention policies and maintaining a workplace culture that supports the health and safety of employees are key elements of comprehensive workplace health. The prevention & health promotion component may include information on substance use and elements that foster healthy lifestyles including healthy eating, stress management, mental health, challenges at work, sports and active living, etc.

This component may also help to create a non-stigmatizing and non-discriminating work environment for people with addictive disorders.



Intervention

If there are clear signs that an employee is dealing with problematic substance use, an early intervention may prompt them to seek help or motivate them to change. The terms and conditions of the intervention must be clearly defined in your workplace policy. Depending on the resources available in your workplace, the information may lead to referral to external programmes or in-house support resources.

Treatment

If problems persist and early intervention has been unsuccessful, employers must then indicate to the individual that their behaviour is harmful to the workplace and that their performance is unacceptable. Employers then explain the various treatment options available through the workplace's assistance programme or the occupational physician. These options may include:

- Hospital-based detoxification
- Outpatient treatment
- Residential treatment programmes such as therapeutic communities
- Family therapy, etc.

Reintegration

Return to work is one of the main objectives of an effective policy for the prevention and management of substance use disorders. A person-centred reintegration plan should be prepared beforehand and integrated in the treatment and follow-up programme.

Employers should be aware that recovering from addictive disorders is a long-term process. Contrary to the situation of an employee who has broken his leg, for example, this process will continue long after the end of the treatment phase.

In addition, because of the prejudices that many people hold, returning to work after addiction treatment can be a daunting experience. People recovering from addiction already tend to suffer disproportionately from guilt, shame, and embarrassment, and these feelings are often brought to the forefront during the challenges of returning to work.





Examples of support measures:

- Develop information and awareness programmes on addictive disorders for all staff members,
- Show support and reminding the employee they are missed and valued by the workplace - by phone, messages, or during a visit,
- Recognize the needs of recovering employees when planning social events in the workplace (for example, providing non-alcoholic beverages),
- Update the employee about any changes that have taken place,
- Offer encouragement and support the employee, but not counselling,
- Be honest, do not enable the recovering employee (cover up or ignore situations),
- Show the employee that he is trusted, allow them to carry their own workload and make decisions.

6 – Evaluation

Evaluation is the final step in the process of creating and implementing a substance use prevention and management policy, and it needs not be complicated. A simple survey can be a starting place to gather necessary information. For example, this survey will focus on:

- The effectiveness of the prevention and management programme and the services offered,
- The success of these programmes and services,
- The areas of improvement or modifications,
- The level of involvement of your staff,
- The justification for the continuation of the programme.



Employers have a duty to create healthy, safe and productive environments for their employees and they must address problematic substance use as a component of workplace health. In this respect, it is essential to develop a coherent and effective drug and alcohol policy based on respect for individuals and rejection of all forms of stigmatization or discrimination.

Bringing Addiction Stigma to an End – The Campaign



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References

1. World Drug Report 2018 (UNODC), excerpt from Executive Summary

2. Even though stigma can affect all addictive disorders, it is widespread in the case of people experiencing problematic alcohol or other drug use (substance use disorder), which is why this document focuses primarily on this population.

3. According to a study by WHO in 14 countries, analyzing 18 potentially stigmatizing conditions - Source : Stigma, social inequality and alcohol and drug use (2008) – Robin Room et al. Online access, 16 June, 2018

4. Adapted from: Problematic Substance Use that Impacts the Workplace - Atlantic Canada Council on Addiction. Consult document for additional details, tools and a step-by-step guide

