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# EAP SUPERVISOR ENHANCEMENT NEWSLETTER



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**DEER OAKS EAP PRESENTS:  
Supervisor Excellence Webinar Series**

*How to Maintain a  
Mentally Healthy  
Workplace Environment*

**Date: January 23, 2023**

**Time: 1:00-2:00 PM CT REGISTER**

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# Managing an Employee in Recovery from a Substance-Use Problem

As a manager, you are in a unique position to notice an alcohol- or substance-use problem and to take action to refer an employee to help. Once an employee has acknowledged the problem, sought help, changed habits, and resumed productive work, you are again in a unique position to support the employee's wellbeing and success at work.

## What does it mean to be in recovery?

When a person is in recovery from an alcohol or substance-use problem, they have voluntarily changed their alcohol- or substance-use habits to live a healthier and more productive life. Addiction does not have a simple on-off switch, however, and is never "cured." Rather, recovery is a process of becoming and remaining free of the influence of alcohol and other drugs for longer and longer periods.

People in recovery often combine abstinence or reduced consumption habits with ongoing treatment, personal growth, social support, and service to others. As such, recovery is a journey. Being in recovery is an achievement; remaining in recovery takes an ongoing effort. The good news is that the longer a person is in recovery, the lower their risk of relapse.

## Your Role as a Manager When an Employee Is in Recovery

In most ways, your role as a manager is the same as it was before you were aware that the employee is in recovery from an alcohol- or substance-use problem. It's up to you to do the following:

- Be aware of and follow your employer's alcohol- and drug-use workplace policies.
- Notice performance problems, and deal with them in a fair and consistent way.
- Help employees improve their performance with supportive coaching.
- Be sure your employees are aware of the resources and support available to them, including the employee assistance program (EAP).

A recovery-supportive workplace alcohol and drug policy will recognize that recovery may involve lapses or recurrences—temporary failures of judgment or short-term incidences of alcohol or substance use. Such lapses or recurrences may

indicate a need for additional or modified treatment. Speak with your human resources (HR) representative to be sure you understand what your organization's policies are when you observe a performance problem and suspect a lapse or recurrence. Those policies may vary for different jobs and may have special provisions for an employee who is in recovery.



## Plan for the employee's return to work.

If an employee has taken time off from work for treatment, participate in planning their return to work. Ideally, a planning conversation will be initiated by the employee's counselor from the treatment program and should include you and an HR representative. If such a conversation has not been scheduled and the employee's return-to-work day is approaching, ask to meet with your HR representative to create a plan for their return. The plan should consider:

- The employee's work schedule—whether a reduced schedule will help the employee step back into the workplace while attending follow-up treatment sessions (if this is what the employee prefers or the counselor recommends).
- The employee's work responsibilities—whether temporary changes in the employee's responsibilities are needed to reduce stressors that might trigger a recurrence or lapse (if this is what the employee prefers or the counselor recommends).
- Expectations for the employee's performance and conduct.

### **Learn about substance use and recovery.**

When working with a person in recovery, it can help to be informed about the nature of addiction and recovery. Knowledge will give you a better understanding of what your employee is going through and might need from you:

- Sign up for any training your employer offers on alcohol or substance use in the workplace.
- Read about addiction treatment and recovery, and the effects of alcohol or substance use on a person's health and behavior.

### **Create a work environment that supports recovery.**

A positive work environment helps all employees thrive and give their best effort. It can also help employees who are in recovery stay alcohol- and drug-free:

- Treat employees with respect.
- Find out what motivates the people who report to you.
- Recognize your team members' priorities outside of work.
- Be generous with praise and recognition.
- Encourage problem-solving, innovation, and collaboration.
- Have zero tolerance for harassment and bullying.
- Be an accessible and supportive coach.

For an employee who is in recovery, simply offering your support and asking how you can be helpful is likely to make a huge difference.

Watch, too, for any indications of resentment or hostility from teammates in response to the employee's behavior before getting treatment. Make it clear that if anyone has problems with another employee's performance, they should bring the matter up with you. Retaliation for past behavior can never be allowed.

### **Respect the employee's privacy.**

As a manager, you may have privileged information about the employee's earlier alcohol- or substance-use problem that the employee's team members may not have. You may know that the employee's absence was for treatment, which is confidential medical information. Unless the employee permits you to share it, you have a responsibility to keep this information private.

Be careful with your own curiosity, too. The employee has no obligation to share details of their treatment.

### **Reduce stigma.**

Understand that alcohol-use disorder and medical-use disorder are medical conditions, not personality flaws or moral failings. Recognize that the employee may be judged by others and stigmatized for their problem, even now that they are in recovery, and that negative words and shunning behavior can leave them feeling isolated and undervalued. Try not to let that be their experience in the workplace.

Share what you have learned about alcohol and substance use with all of your employees, if you can do it in a way that doesn't violate the privacy of the employee who is in recovery. Watch for negative language about people with substance-use problems, and correct it with more respectful language. ("Addict" is a negative and judgmental label. "Person with a substance-use disorder" is more accurate and respectful.)

### **Be prepared for and deal with relapse.**

Recovery is not always a smooth journey. As with other chronic diseases, recovery from alcohol or substance-use disorder can involve lapses or recurrences—temporary backsliding into former behaviors. It can also involve relapse—a full resumption of the addictive behavior.

Know that there is a difference between a lapse and a relapse. If your employee has one bad day, that's not necessarily the end of their recovery. They may be able to get right back on track, perhaps with some additional counseling or by reconsidering the approach to treatment. It's not your business to diagnose the problem or know how they get back on track. Your role is to be clear about performance expectations and fair in calling attention to performance problems. With clear, timely, and constructive communication about work performance, you may be able to help the employee recognize a problem before it gets out of control.

If your employee does have a relapse, that's not necessarily the end of recovery either. As long as no policies have been violated and no one has been put at risk, you might give the employee the chance to renew treatment or try a different treatment approach. It's in both of your interests that the employee succeed, both at work and in their efforts to manage their alcohol- or substance-use problem in their life outside of work.

The sooner your employee can get back into recovery, and the longer they are able to stay in recovery, the better their long-term outlook.



## For More Information

“Accommodating Workers with a History of Substance Abuse,” Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). By L. Nagele-Pizza, July 21, 2017. <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/legal-and-compliance/state-and-local-updates/pages/accommodating-workers-with-a-history-of-substance-abuse.aspx>

“Alcoholism in the Workplace: A Handbook for Supervisors.” Office of Personnel Management (OPM). <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/worklife/reference-materials/alcoholism-in-the-workplace-a-handbook-for-supervisors>

“Employing and Managing with Addictions,” SHRM. January 12, 2018. <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/personswithaddictions.aspx>

“Workplace Supported Recovery Program.” National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). Page last reviewed July 27, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/opioids/wsrp/default.html>

Source: Morgan, H. (2021, October). *Managing an employee who is in recovery from an alcohol- or substance-use problem* (C. Meeker & B. Schuette, Eds.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.



# Signs of Substance Abuse in the Workplace

This article provides a listing of the most common signs and symptoms of substance abuse in the workplace. Please note that a number of these signs and symptoms also may apply to addictions other than to alcohol or drugs. It is important to remember that addictions to alcohol and drugs as well as to other substances and behaviors are reflected through a number of symptoms as well as a pattern of signs and symptoms. Thus, taken alone, most of the behaviors described below could have a cause other than substance abuse.

## Signs in the Workplace

- Deteriorating Performance
- Inconsistent work quality
- Lowered productivity
- Erratic work pace
- Decreased concentration
- Sleepiness or fatigue
- More mistakes than usual
- Carelessness
- Errors in judgment

## Absenteeism

- Frequent absences and lateness, particularly before and after weekends and following pay days
- Absences explained by complaints of flu, a sore throat, headaches, stomach distress
- Leaves early or extends lunch period more frequently
- Disappears from work without explanation for extended periods of time

## Attitude and Physical Appearance

- Work starts to look sloppy or lacks detail
- Blames others for his or her own shortcomings
- Avoids supervisor and coworkers
- Takes less care of personal appearance
- Doesn't get along as well with others

## Increased Health and Safety Hazards

- Has an accident rate that is higher than average
- Is careless when handling and maintaining machinery
- Takes needless risks to try to increase productivity after a period of poor performance
- Seems less concerned or unconcerned for the safety of coworkers

## Additional Signs

### Interpersonal and Financial Problems Increase

- Decreased social contact with friends, family
- Increased family tension, talk of separation or divorce
- Children exhibit behavioral problems (e.g., delinquency)
- Financial problems increase
- Stops participating in recreational activities normally enjoyed (e.g., bowling, playing cards)

### Additional Signs and Symptoms

- Is stopped and/or arrested for driving while intoxicated/under the influence
- Appears preoccupied with drinking and/or drugs (e.g., spending a lot of mental energy planning when to drink)
- Drinks in inappropriate situations (e.g., when caring for kids, going to the movies)
- Drinks in secret
- Drinks alone
- Hides alcohol or drugs

Source: *Workplace Options. (Reviewed 2018). Signs of substance abuse in the workplace. Raleigh, NC: Author.*

## Ask Your EAP!

**The following are answers to common questions supervisors have regarding employee issues and making EAP referrals. As always, if you have specific questions about referring an employee or managing a workgroup issue, feel free to make a confidential call to the EAP for a management consultation.**

*Q. I am now supervising remote staff. I can see how communication, trust, and engagement (trying to ensure remote employees are happy and delivering their best) will be challenging. What are the supervision challenges that will delay my referral of a problem employee to the EAP?*

A. Communication is the key issue that affects remote workers and your relationship with them. The other two concerns you cite—trust and engagement—have mostly to do with the effectiveness of your communication strategy. It is crucial to create communication protocols and systems so those you supervise do not feel left out or unsure of what you want them to do and are working with recognition, value, and parity with office employees despite being off-site. Any deficits in these three areas likely would result in cynicism, coworker conflicts, loss of engagement, and diminished loyalty and turnover. Employees may compensate for their feelings of disconnection by reducing productivity or splitting their work time between work and personal needs. Some of your employees may have productivity issues even under the best workplace conditions. The degree to which you measure the quality or quantity of work assigned to their essential functions will determine the ease of being able to refer them to the EAP if they need assistance of some type.

*Q. I interviewed an employee for one of our new positions, but he looks like he might be an alcoholic or have a history of alcoholism. I know the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) applies in this situation, but is the EAP the right resource concerning understanding its provisions and restrictions?*

A. Your human resources advisor is your go-to professional for concerns about interviewing, the hiring process, and laws like the ADA and how they may apply in certain situations. The ADA treats actively drinking employees with substance use disorders and those who have been treated for addictive diseases differently. Decisions you make based upon your perception of their recovery or non-recovery status can also have legal implications. Sometimes, managers are educated and trained to understand employment laws, but if you are not applying them or recalling them regularly, it is easy to get confused. So, even if in doubt, reach out to human resources. Later, after someone has been hired, should you become concerned about behaviors, signs, and symptoms, or wonder how you should document performance, your EAP is available.

*Information contained in this newsletter is for general information purposes only and is not intended to be specific guidance for any particular supervisor or human resource management concern. Some of it might not apply to your particular company policies and available programs. This information is proprietary and intended only for eligible EAP members. For specific guidance on handling individual employee problems, consult with Deer Oaks by calling the Helpline.*

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