

# Substance Use in the Workplace Fact Sheet



## WHY SHOULD A WORKPLACE LOOK AT PROBLEMATIC SUBSTANCE USE ISSUES?

The fact that some people use substances such as alcohol or illicit drugs, or that some people misuse prescription drugs is not new. The awareness that the use and abuse of substances may affect the workplace just as the workplace may affect how a person uses substances is, however, increasing in acceptance. Many aspects of the workplace require alertness, and accurate and quick reflexes. An impairment to these qualities can cause incidents, and interfere with the accuracy and efficiency of work.

## WAYS THAT PROBLEMATIC SUBSTANCE USE MAY CAUSE ISSUES AT WORK INCLUDE:

- any impact on a person's judgment, alertness, perception, motor coordination or emotional state that also impacts working safely or safety sensitive decisions
- after-effects of substance use (hangover, withdrawal) affecting job performance
- absenteeism, illness, and/or reduced productivity
- preoccupation with obtaining and using substances while at work, interfering with attention and concentration
- illegal activities at work including selling illicit drugs to other employees,
- psychological or stress-related effects due to substance use by a family member, friend or co-worker that affects another person's job performance.

Note that substance use is often thought of as an addiction or dependence, but use can be anywhere on the spectrum or scale from recreational to frequent to problematic. As a result, there are varying impacts on lives and work. The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health use the following "4 C's" to describe addiction:

- craving
- loss of control of amount or frequency of use
- compulsion to use
- use despite consequences

## WHAT WILL BE COVERED IN THIS DOCUMENT?

This document will discuss issues such as how problematic substance use may affect the workplace, possible costs to an organization, and how an organization can address such issues.

## IN GENERAL, WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF VARIOUS TYPES OF SUBSTANCES?

| Category | Examples | Examples of General Effects |
|----------|----------|-----------------------------|
|----------|----------|-----------------------------|

|               |  |   |
|---------------|--|---|
| Alcohol       | beer, wine, spirits  | impaired judgement, slowed reflexes, impaired motor function, sleepiness or drowsiness, coma, overdose may be fatal                         |
| Cannabis      | marijuana, hashish   | distorted sense of time, impaired memory, impaired coordination   |
| Depressants   | sleeping medicines, sedatives, some tranquilizers                | inattention, slowed reflexes, depression, impaired balance, drowsiness, coma, overdose may be fatal   |
| Hallucinogens | LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide), PCP (phencyclidine), mescaline | inattention, sensory illusions, hallucinations, disorientation, psychosis   |
| Inhalants     | hydrocarbons, solvents, gasoline                                 | intoxication similar to alcohol, dizziness, headache  |
| Nicotine      | cigarettes, chewing tobacco, snuff                               | initial stimulant, later depressant effects   |
| Opiates       | morphine, heroin, codeine, some prescription pain medications    | loss of interest, “nodding”, overdose may be fatal. If used by injection, the sharing of needles may spread Hepatitis B, or C and HIV/AIDS. |
| Stimulants    | cocaine, amphetamines  | elevated mood, overactivity, tension/anxiety, rapid heartbeat, constriction of blood vessels  |

## WHAT ARE THE COSTS TO A BUSINESS?

The economic impacts of substance use in Canada to businesses or industry have been traditionally difficult to measure. Many costs are hidden by general absenteeism or illnesses, “unnoticed” lack of productivity, or inability or reluctance to link substance use directly with causes of incidents.

Costs to a business may be both direct and indirect. The impact of substance use that have been reported include:

- safety (fatalities, incidents, etc.)
- absenteeism/sick leave/turnover or presenteeism
- loss of production, and
- workplace violence and harassment.

Additional costs can include:

- tardiness/sleeping on the job
- theft
- poor decision making
- loss of efficiency
- lower morale and physical well-being of worker and co-workers
- increased likelihood of having trouble with co-workers/supervisors
- training of new employees
- disciplinary procedures
- drug testing programs
- medical/rehabilitation/employee assistance programs

## ARE THERE ELEMENTS OF WORK THAT MAY CONTRIBUTE TO THE USE OF SUBSTANCES?

Various and numerous organizational, personal and social factors can play a major role why a person may choose to use a substance. In general, however, some work-related factors can include:

- high stress,
- high demand/low control situations,
- low job satisfaction,
- long hours or irregular shifts,
- fatigue,
- repetitious duties,
- periods of inactivity or boredom,
- isolation,
- lack of opportunity for promotion,
- lack of, remote, or irregular supervision and,
- easy access to substances.

## **WHAT CAN THE WORKPLACE DO?**

Work can be an important place to address substance use issues. Employers and employees can collaborate to design policies which outline what is an acceptable code of behaviour and what is not. By establishing or promoting programs such as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), employers can help employees more directly or provide referrals to community services.

The policy can cover substance use issues, or it can use an overall approach such as impairment in the workplace. The main goal is that workplaces are encouraged to establish a procedure or policy so that help can be provided in a professional and consistent manner. It is important for supervisors and managers to have a resource or procedure that they can rely on if the need arises. Employees need to know that everyone will be treated the same way. These actions help to reduce the stigma associated with substance use. When stigma is reduced, it is hoped that people will seek help without fear, and will speak openly about substance use issues. Early treatment and support is encouraged.

In addition, managers and supervisors should be educated in how to recognize and deal with substance use issues and employees should be offered educational programs. Note it is not the role of the supervisor or employer to diagnose a possible substance use or dependency problem. Their role is to identify if an employee is impaired, and to take the appropriate steps as per the organization's policy.

## **WHAT ELEMENTS SHOULD BE IN A SUBSTANCE USE OR IMPAIRMENT IN THE WORKPLACE POLICY?**

A substance use or impairment in the workplace policy should emphasize that the program is confidential and be jointly created by both labour and management.

Elements of the policy would include:

- definition of substance use and abuse, and impairment
- statement of who is covered by the policy and/or program
- statement of the employee's rights to confidentiality
- that employee education will be provided (e.g., a substance-free awareness program, prevention and resilience education)
- that training will be provided to employees, supervisors, and others in identifying impaired behaviour
- provision for assisting substance users
- outline of how substance use and impairment will be addressed in the workplace
- if necessary, statement of under what circumstances drug or alcohol testing will be conducted
- provision for disciplinary actions