

Tips for dealing with substance abuse problems in the workplace

An accident caused by an impaired employee can devastate a business. But drug and alcohol abuse are complex problems that should be handled by professionals, experts say.

How can you tell if a co-worker might have a substance abuse problem, and what should you do about it? Here are tips from experts:

Watch for signs: According to the federal Drug Enforcement Administration, indications that an employee might have a substance abuse problem include work absences without notification, frequent disappearances from the work site, work performance that alternates between high and low productivity, and progressive deterioration in personal appearance and hygiene.

Small-business vulnerability: Businesses without substance abuse policies can be particularly vulnerable. "Individuals who can't adhere to a drug-free workplace policy seek employment at firms that don't have one," the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration says, "and the cost of just one accident caused by an impaired employee can devastate a small business." For information on how a small business can set a policy, see <http://www.dol.gov/elaws/asp/drugfree/drugs/screen2.asp>.

Hurtful helping: Don't be an enabler by concealing substance abusers' poor work performance or lending them money, the American Council for Drug Education says. You might think you're helping, but it's more likely that you're making it possible for the abuse to continue.

Don't intervene on your own: Drug and alcohol addictions are complex problems that should be handled by professionals, the American Council for Drug Education says. Getting professionals involved is probably the best thing you can do, not only for the individual but also for the workplace.

If you're the boss, don't delay taking action: "Letting things go only leads to increased isolation of the individual and this simply leads to a worsening of the problem, not only for the individual, their colleagues and the organization, but also for the employer," Clive Tobutt advises in the book "Alcohol at Work: Managing Alcohol Problems and Issues in the Workplace."

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February 12, 2012 | By Scott J. Wilson, Los Angeles Times