

Substance Abuse in the Workplace

There seems to be an endless supply of stories about illicit drug use, alcohol abuse and misuse of prescription drugs by Hollywood stars, on-air TV and radio personalities and music icons. But it's not just celebrities who struggle with alcohol and other drug problems.

Substance abuse is widespread in the United States. And people with substance abuse problems are not likely to leave those problems behind when they come to work.

Working under the Influence

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that nearly 75 percent of all adult illicit drug users — and nearly 80 percent of adult binge drinkers and heavy drinkers — are employed either full or part time.

Over seven percent of American workers drink during the workday, mostly at lunch. Even more — nine percent — have nursed a hangover in the workplace. Regardless of where and when illicit drug use or heavy alcohol abuse takes place, substance abusers have higher rates of turnover and absenteeism. Moreover, on-the-job impairment can lead to an increased risk of accidents and injuries, and to lower levels of productivity and



employee morale, not only for substance abusers, but also for those working alongside them.

Dealing with Drug-Impaired Individuals

It can be difficult to identify all but the most obvious signs of substance abuse — slurred or slowed speech, dizziness or drowsiness, impaired coordination, bloodshot or glassy eyes, confusion. And a person who shows one or more of these signs may not be abusing alcohol or other drugs: Diabetic reaction, stroke, stress, lack of sleep or adverse reaction to legally prescribed medications can produce similar symptoms.

Only qualified professionals can diagnose an individual who is exhibiting unusual

behavior — it's not your job to do so. If you see someone behaving strangely, look to see if the person is wearing a medic alert tag. If you can safely do so, try to gather additional information about the person's condition and call for assistance, if needed.

Use active listening skills, but be aware that individuals who are drug-impaired may not think rationally and their communication skills may be affected. Some effective strategies to follow are:

- Express genuine concern for the person's safety
- Keep your message short, simple and to the point
- Remain professional
- Keep a safe distance between yourself and the individual

Drug-impaired persons may be prone to unpredictable or aggressive behavior. If the individual

- threatens physical harm toward you, others or him/herself
- behaves in a manner that causes you to fear for your own or another's safety

get yourself and others to safety as quickly as possible and immediately call for assistance.

The More You Know

Your ability to understand and identify substance abuse in the workplace, and your knowledge of procedures to deal safely and effectively with impaired persons, can help keep your workplace safer and more secure. For additional information see the July 2005 issue of *Security Spotlight*. Securitas personnel also have access to the e-learning course *Substance Abuse* on the LMS.

Possible Substance-Abuse Indicators

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the following performance and behavior problems may (but do not necessarily) indicate possible substance abuse:

Performance

- Inconsistent work quality
- Poor concentration
- Lowered productivity
- Increased absenteeism
- Unexplained disappearances from the worksite
- Carelessness, mistakes
- Errors in judgment
- Needless risk taking
- Disregard for safety
- Tardiness, extended lunch periods, early departures

Behaviors

- Frequent financial problems
- Avoidance of friends and colleagues
- Blaming others for own problems and shortcomings
- Complaints about problems at home
- Deterioration in personal appearance
- Complaints and excuses of vaguely defined illnesses

If you observe signs or behaviors that indicate someone at your workplace may have a substance abuse problem, report it. Don't worry about jeopardizing a person's job. If someone is abusing drugs, he or she is in far greater danger if you do not report your concern. Identifying a problem can be the first step in helping an individual overcome it.

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