



DrugFree@WorkPlace

Consequences of Drug Abuse

Most employees know someone with a substance abuse disorder, and many know someone who has lost or almost lost a family member due to drug or alcohol addiction. Alcohol and drug use-related conditions are major public health and workplace challenges that unfortunately are still surrounded by misunderstanding and shame.

Drug and alcohol use problems continue to take an enormous toll on companies, individuals, families, and society. Businesses and communities suffer from drug-related losses, crime, and violence, and neighborhoods suffer from the abuse and neglect of children and the increased costs of healthcare associated with substance abuse. America's current approach to substance abuse is not working.

Drug and alcohol abuse has a wide range of effects, and even one single instance of alcohol or drug misuse can have profound negative consequences. Some of the direct consequences of substance abuse range from effects on heart rate and regulation of body temperature to psychotic episodes, overdose, and death. Many more people now die from alcohol and drug overdoses each year than are killed in car crashes.

Drug and alcohol abuse can impair judgment, leading to risky behaviors, including driving under the influence (DUI), unprotected sex, and needle sharing. Driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs contributes to thousands of deaths annually, and more than 10% of motor vehicle operators report engaging in this dangerous activity each year.

Drug addicts and alcoholics cause harm to themselves and those around them. Harms can include overdoses, relational

and social violence, motor vehicle wrecks, as well as injuries, murder, and suicide.

Alcohol and drug abuse is estimated to cost American society \$442 billion each year in healthcare costs, lost productivity, and criminal justice costs. But numerous evidence-based prevention and treatment policies and programs can be implemented to reduce these costs while improving health and wellness. Is it not time to change how America addresses substance abuse?

Prevention—A Better Response

More than 10 million full-time workers in our nation have a substance use disorder—a leading cause of disability—but studies have demonstrated that implementing prevention and treatment programs for employees with substance use disorders can be cost-effective in improving worker productivity and reducing the personal and professional damage done by drug and alcohol misuse.

The U.S. Surgeon General's 2016 report, *Facing Addiction in America*, found that significant advances in prevention science have been made over the past four decades, including the identification of major risk and protective factors and the development of more than two dozen research-tested prevention programs that can be implemented in businesses, households, schools, clinical settings, and community centers.

Substance abuse prevention programs can have a strong impact and be cost-effective, but only if evidence-based components are used and if those components are delivered in a coordinated and consistent fashion. Employers, parents, schools, healthcare systems, faith communities, and social service organizations should be involved in delivering comprehensive, evidence-based community prevention programs that are sustained over time.

To be effective, drug free workplace and community prevention programs and policies should be designed to address the common risk and protective factors that influence the most common health threats affecting Americans. They should be tested through research and should be delivered continuously by those who have been properly trained and supervised to use them.

Substance Abuse Treatment at Work

In addition to drug prevention programs, employees with substance abuse problems at all levels of severity can benefit from counseling and treatment, and research has shown that incorporating substance abuse treatment into employee health insurance plans can improve the quality of treatment and counseling services.

Unfortunately, however, only those with the most severe substance abuse disorders have historically received treatment, and even then, only in private and often expensive addiction treatment programs that were originally designed decades ago to treat addictions as character flaws or personality disorders.

Additionally, even though 45% of patients seeking treatment for substance abuse have a co-occurring mental disorder (often brought on and exacerbated by self-medicating with drugs or alcohol to treat the underlying mental health problem), most substance abuse treatment programs are not part of, or even affiliated with, mental or physical healthcare organizations. Furthermore, most general healthcare agencies, including hospitals, don't provide screening, diagnosis, or treatment for substance abuse.

This separation of substance abuse treatment from the rest of healthcare has helped to cause a lack of understanding about the medical nature of addiction, lack of awareness among those who have a significant physical and/or mental health problem, and slow implementation of scientifically supported medical treatments by addiction treatment providers.

Simply put: America's mainstream healthcare system has not been adequately prepared to address the increasing substance abuse-related problems of millions of patients in our country. This has led to incorrect diagnoses, unsuitable therapy plans, poor adherence to treatment plans by patients, and higher rates of hospital and emergency department admissions.

Treating substance abuse disorders and addiction should be no different than treating other chronic illnesses. When addiction is treated properly, recurrence rates are similar to those of other chronic diseases like asthma, diabetes, and hypertension. With comprehensive continuing treatment, drug addicts and alcoholics can recover. But in order for treatment programs to be successful, healthcare providers must be competently educated and cross-trained in these areas. The government must begin to require that medical, nursing, dental, pharmacy, and other professional schools include addiction treatment in their curriculum—and medical associations should provide continuing education courses on addiction treatment for those already in practice. America must begin to focus on prevention and treatment in order to positively impact America's drug problem.

To help us combat substance abuse, go to www.LiveDrugFree.org and click on "Donate!"