

Alcoholism in the Workplace

When behavioral issues require professional help

BY MAZIE LEFTWICH, PSY.D.



DEAR DR. MAZIE,

Your last article on arrogance was really helpful, but you didn't mention alcohol as one of the causes. This seems to be one of those issues that no one wants to talk about. If I believe one of my employees has an alcohol-related behavioral problem, how might I handle it sensitively?

Jessie in Baltimore



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Alcoholism in the workplace is a very big problem. According to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD), it is estimated that at least 15 million full-time employees suffer from severe drinking problems. And the cost to American businesses is significant. The most common problems include theft, poor decision-making, high turnover, arrogant behavior and a lowering of morale. The more serious consequences involve fatal accidents, injuries, absenteeism and loss of productivity.

The NCADD reports that there are two specific kinds of drinking behavior that significantly contribute to work-performance problems. One is drinking before work, during lunch or at company functions. The other is a result of consistent heavy drinking the night before, which can cause debilitating hangovers the following day. Regardless of the type of drinking, the resulting behavioral issues can cause havoc in the workplace as well as at home. Family members also become victims. They may find themselves experiencing a lack of focus, absenteeism and increased health problems, all of which can result in poor job performance at their own workplace.

Another concern for managers and employers is what is commonly called the dry drunk. In basic terms, this is an alcoholic who is not currently drinking alcohol but is still exhibiting the same negative behaviors. Someone who has made a decision to stop drinking might openly admit going to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and even brag about being on the wagon. This will typically lead to a false sense

of self, as it allows them to feel they have made changes without actually modifying their old drinking behavior. They might give the impression that they aren't as sensitive as they were in the past and encourage their coworkers to approach them more openly. However, without a real change in behavior, they are still difficult to deal with and may actually be creating new problems.

It is important for us to recognize that alcohol/drug dependency is a genuine disease. For the truly addicted, their brain and body craves the substance. They actually feel the most normal when using. This is like being really thirsty, and despite drinking water to satisfy that thirst, there is still an ongoing compulsion to drink more. It is a horrible, crippling disease. Yet through proper treatment individuals can be helped.

The best answer for dealing with the myriad of problems caused by alcoholism in the workplace is to inform your Human Resources Department. HR Professionals are skilled in these types of issues and can counsel the individual, establish tangible expectations, and refer them to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselor. For 30 years, my counseling clinic provided EAP counseling to employees from a large number of businesses and governmental agencies. Employees are provided with both supportive and reality-based counseling, including an assessment of their ability and willingness to get help as well as a referral to various alcoholism/drug dependency services in the local area. This is the standard for EAP service providers, and it can offer the life-changing help the alcoholic may need.