



Substance Abuse & the Workplace

We usually think of drug users as unemployed individuals who can't hold down a job, and who live on the edge of poverty. This common misconception is often not the case. Most drug users are employed, and when they arrive for work, they don't leave their problems at the door. In 2005, of the 17.2 million illegal drug users age 18 and over, 12.9 million of them---75 percent---were employed. Even more troubling is the fact that, in recent years, workers in the construction industry have reported the highest rates of substance use and abuse. You must be aware of the hazards created by substance abuse and know how to help promote and maintain a drug-free workplace.

One of the hazards of abusing drugs before work or during work is the risk of impairment. If you try to do your job while under the influence of drugs or alcohol, you're more likely to cause or be the victim of a fatal accident. Statistics show that between 10 and 20 percent of the nation's workers who die on the job test positive for alcohol or other drugs. Workplace drug and alcohol abuse compromises the safety of workers as well as the public by contributing to accidents and injuries. Other effects of substance abuse include increased absences, errors, low morale, and higher illness rates.

The impact of substance abuse can be felt by more than just the users. Often those affected by someone who has a drug or alcohol problem change their behavior to adapt, ignore, struggle, or otherwise cope with that person's substance abuse. If you have to work harder, re-do work, or cover for a co-worker, then you're adopting a behavior called "enabling."

Enabling is taking actions to protect the person with the problem from the consequences of his or her actions. While you may be trying to help your co-worker, you're actually making the situation worse. You're allowing your co-worker to continue the destructive behavior and helping him or her avoid dealing with the problem.

Be sure you understand your employer's drug-free workplace policy. Set a good example by following it. If you see any violations of the policy or notice that a co-worker is impaired by drugs or alcohol, do not ignore the situation. Act immediately to prevent the individual from creating workplace hazards. Inform your supervisor right away. Even if you are wrong in your suspicions, when it comes to your safety and that of your co-workers, it's better to be safe than sorry. Many employers and local services provide confidential drug rehabilitation at no cost. Get help if you need it.

Remember that prescription medications and over-the-counter drugs, even if taken according to the directions, can impair your physical and mental abilities. Check with



your doctor or pharmacist to make sure that the medicine that is supposed to make you better doesn't get you killed.

SAFETY REMINDER

You must be willing to draw a line with co-workers. Your safety and the safety of others in the workplace is the most important thing to protect.