

Reference document

Alcohol addiction



Table of content

Introduction	2
Definition	2
Signs and symptoms	3
Intervening with an employee	4
Available treatments and resources	5
Conclusion	5

Introduction

Generally, alcohol consumption evokes a variety of emotions from happiness to sadness, stress and so on. It is estimated that 75% of the population drinks alcohol, of which 10% experience addiction and distress.

Someone who deals with alcohol addiction will show more or less apparent signs of distress. In order to overcome such an addiction, they need a lot of motivation and a strong will to regain control over their life, which is a huge effort when compared to the devastating effects these problems can bring.

Very often, since work is also affected by this problem, the individual suffering from alcoholism will need to seek help from his employer who will then need to raise awareness about his situation and make sure to keep the employee accountable for his actions.

Definition

Alcohol is considered to be a depressant. First because of its main ingredient being ethanol, which has several effects on the brain's neural activity, such as increasing the release of dopamine in the brain – also known as the happy hormone – and stimulating endorphin production – a natural morphine produced by the brain – creating its relaxing effect.

There are three very different types of drinking behaviors that must be defined, starting from normal drinking to addiction and heavy drinking.



Recreational drinking

Generally, recreational drinking doesn't involve health risks and bears no consequences to yourself or others.

Heavy drinking

According to the *DSM-IV-TR* (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 4th revision*) heavy drinking involves “a maladaptive pattern of drinking, leading to clinically significant impairment or distress, as manifested by at least one of the following occurring within a 12-month period:

- Recurrent use of alcohol resulting in a failure to fulfill major role obligations at work, school, or home (e.g., repeated absences or poor work performance related to alcohol use; alcohol-related absences, suspensions, or expulsions from school; neglect of children or household).
- Recurrent alcohol use in situations in which it is physically hazardous (e.g., driving an automobile or operating a machine when impaired by alcohol use).
- Recurrent alcohol-related legal problems (e.g., arrests for alcohol-related disorderly conduct).
- Continued alcohol use despite having persistent or recurrent social or interpersonal problems caused or intensified by the effects of alcohol (e.g., arguments with spouse about consequences of intoxication).”

Heavy drinking is therefore considered to be a serious health problem that can have major consequences in both personal and professional life.

Addictive drinking

Again, according to the definition of the *DSM-IV-TR*, alcohol addiction means “a maladaptive pattern of drinking, leading to clinically significant impairment or distress, as manifested by three or more of the following occurring at any time in the same 12-month period:

- Need for markedly increased amounts of alcohol to achieve intoxication or desired effect; or markedly diminished effect with continued use of the same amount of alcohol.
- The characteristic withdrawal syndrome for alcohol; or drinking (or using a closely related substance) to relieve or avoid withdrawal symptoms.
- Drinking in larger amounts or over a longer period than intended.

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- Persistent desire or one or more unsuccessful efforts to cut down or control drinking.
 - A great deal of time spent in activities necessary to obtain, to use, or to recover from the effects of drinking.
 - Important social, occupational, or recreational activities given up or reduced because of drinking.
 - Continued drinking despite knowledge of having a persistent or recurrent physical or psychological problem that is likely to be caused or exacerbated by drinking.”

In this case, the person suffering from alcohol addiction may encounter problems at work because there is contamination of observable symptoms across all spheres of life (personal, family, professional and emotional). The collateral damage will therefore become obvious and very stressful for the person attempting to somehow keep it all secret.

Signs and symptoms

Several physical, psychological and behavioral indicators point to problem drinking. These indicators are signs that an employee may need qualified psychological help and support from his or her manager.

Physical signs

Physically, an individual suffering from a drinking problem will show the following signs:

- Red eyes
- Perspiration
- Trembling
- Impaired coordination
- Alcohol breath
- Slurred speech
- Diarrhea

- Vomiting
- Etc.

Psychological signs

Psychologically, certain signs or symptoms are also representative of this type of problem:

- Irritable or aggressive behavior
- Impaired concentration
- Memory problems
- Mood swings
- Isolation
- Etc.

Behavioral signs

Alcohol issues may also be detected through behavioral signs such as:

- Frequently borrowing money from colleagues
- Lying
- Invoking odd excuses
- Having inappropriate reactions
- Frequent last minute absences, most often after pay days or an authorized leave
- Repeatedly late
- Leaving early, often without telling colleagues
- Irregular quality of work
- Errors of judgement
- Etc.

Behavior at work and quality of work are directly affected by a drinking problem. It is therefore important to meet with the employee in order to address the issue quickly for multiple reasons such as:

- Intoxication caused by excessive drinking may alter:
 - Judgment
 - Vigilance
 - Perception
 - Motor coordination
 - Emotional state (abnormal behavior)
- Excessive drinking effects like hangover and fatigue can directly affect the employee's productivity.
- In the long run, heavy drinking can result in chronic drinking (or addiction) causing severe health issues.

As with mental illnesses, alcohol addiction is still a delicate subject for employers who tend to feel uncomfortable and even powerless when dealing with such an issue. However, it is important to understand that omitting to take action, when in presence of objective signs and symptoms, can lead to devastating consequences for both the employee and the organization. Thus there is a shared responsibility within the organization for the support to be provided.

Intervening with an employee

Being able to monitor signs of drinking problems allows to quickly recognize employees in need of help and support. These signs also make it easier to manage absenteeism and performance issues when required. And even if they are not signs of alcohol abuse, they may be a good indicator that an employee is going through a difficult time or simply needs help.

The suggested intervention process with an employee should follow three steps.

Step 1 – Observe and document

A manager's first step is to identify potential signs of problem drinking. Importantly, he or she should document their observations to help draw a clear picture of the situation and to avoid generalizing an isolated incident.

Step 2 – Meet with the employee

The second and decisive step is to meet with the employee. It's the manager's opportunity to clearly communicate the observed issues and demonstrate genuine concern for a health issue requiring professional assistance. In some cases, some employers may even require psychological counselling or alcohol treatment. Organizational health is a responsibility shared by both the employer and employee and, for that reason, both parties must commit to the meeting.

At any given time, the manager may have to deal with an advanced state of disorganization from the employee. For example:

- Drinking in the workplace
- Or being drunk while at work

This kind of disorganization must be handled immediately. The manager must intervene and meet with the employee.

After the meeting, the manager may choose to send the employee home. Importantly, the employee's disorganization in the workplace must not be ignored; the manager must take immediate action against the employee or situation.

Step 3 – Follow-up

The third step could involve monitoring the employee's progress. Some measures could be more restrictive than others. It all depends on the degree of the issue, its frequency and severity. Monitoring is key to the success of the intervention. A good approach is to begin follow-ups a few weeks after determining corrective measures.

Key tips for the meeting

It can be challenging for a manager to meet with an employee struggling with alcohol abuse. Follow these pointers:

- Meet in a private area to preserve confidentiality.
- Be well prepared for the meeting.
- Review your notes and observations.
- Gather information relevant to the meeting.
- Be aware of available resources and how to reach the assistance program.
- Be empathic yet firm.
- Avoid confrontation with direct accusations.
- Set a follow-up date and write a report using notes jotted down during the meeting.

In case of significant concerns or conflict of interest, we recommend discussing the matter with a superior or contacting the human resources department.

Treatments and available resources

A key success factor to the effective treatment of alcohol addiction is to coordinate stakeholders, specialized care facilities, doctors, employees and even insurers who cover the treatments.

In some cases, a simple consultation – with or without treatment – will produce interesting results and the withdrawal will be to cease drinking or to taper off alcohol consumption.

Specialized addiction help can be found through the assistance program or other community resources such as:

- Drugs: help and referral (in Quebec): www.drogue-aiderreference.qc.ca
- Addiction Prevention Centre (in Quebec): www.cqld.ca
- Éduc'alcool (in Quebec): www.educalcool.qc.ca
- Alcoholics Anonymous: www.aa.org
- Drug and Alcohol Helpline (in Ontario): www.drugandalcoholhelpline.ca
- Etc.

Conclusion

People struggling with alcohol addiction don't typically reach out for help. They often lose self-esteem and refuse to talk about their condition. In some cases, only peer-pressure from family, friends or colleagues raises their awareness, opening their eyes to the impact of their alcohol abuse and also to how valuable they are to people around them.

During the meeting, the employee might feel shame or be surprised when being confronted with the different observations, which can lead to a negative reaction and isolation. Managers must then keep in mind that their caring and empathy are as important as the employee's willingness to find a solution.

The following resources can also be helpful to manage an alcohol addiction issue:

- Browse the FAQ
- Take advantage of Health *InSight* Support Services
- Turn to your company's EAP
- Confide in a qualified professional in case of emergency