

Managing an Employee in Recovery from a Substance-Use Problem

As a manager, you are in a unique position to notice an alcohol- or substance-use problem and to take action to refer an employee to help. Once an employee has acknowledged the problem, sought help, changed habits, and resumed productive work, you are again in a unique position to support the employee's wellbeing and success at work.

What does it mean to be in recovery?

When a person is in recovery from an alcohol or substance-use problem, they have voluntarily changed their alcohol- or substance-use habits to live a healthier and more productive life. Addiction does not have a simple on-off switch, however, and is never "cured." Rather, recovery is a process of becoming and remaining free of the influence of alcohol and other drugs for longer and longer periods.

People in recovery often combine abstinence or reduced consumption habits with ongoing treatment, personal growth, social support, and service to others. As such, recovery is a journey. Being in recovery is an achievement; remaining in recovery takes an ongoing effort. The good news is that the longer a person is in recovery, the lower their risk of relapse.

Your Role as a Manager When an Employee Is in Recovery

In most ways, your role as a manager is the same as it was before you were aware that the employee is in recovery from an alcohol- or substance-use problem. It's up to you to do the following:

- Be aware of and follow your employer's alcohol- and drug-use workplace policies.
- Notice performance problems, and deal with them in a fair and consistent way.
- Help employees improve their performance with supportive coaching.
- Be sure your employees are aware of the resources and support available to them, including the employee assistance program (EAP).

A recovery-supportive workplace alcohol and drug policy will recognize that recovery may involve *lapses* or *recurrences*—temporary failures of judgment or short-term incidences of alcohol or substance use. Such lapses or recurrences may indicate a need for additional or modified treatment. Speak with your human resources (HR) representative to be sure you understand what your organization's policies are when you observe a performance problem and suspect a lapse or recurrence. Those policies may vary for different jobs and may have special provisions for an employee who is in recovery.

Plan for the employee's return to work.

If an employee has taken time off from work for treatment, participate in planning their return to work. Ideally, a planning conversation will be initiated by the employee's EAP counselor or a counselor from the treatment program and should include you and an HR representative. If such a conversation has not been scheduled and the employee's return-to-work day is approaching, ask to meet with your HR representative to create a plan for their return. The plan should consider

- The employee's work schedule—whether a reduced schedule will help the employee step back into the workplace while attending follow-up treatment sessions (if this is what the employee prefers or the

counselor recommends)

- The employee's work responsibilities—whether temporary changes in the employee's responsibilities are needed to reduce stressors that might trigger a recurrence or lapse (if this is what the employee prefers or the counselor recommends)
- Expectations for the employee's performance and conduct

Learn about substance use and recovery.

When working with a person in recovery, it can help to be informed about the nature of addiction and recovery. Knowledge will give you a better understanding of what your employee is going through and might need from you:

- Sign up for any training your employer offers on alcohol or substance use in the workplace.
- Read about addiction treatment and recovery, and the effects of alcohol or substance use on a person's health and behavior.

Create a work environment that supports recovery.

A positive work environment helps all employees thrive and give their best effort. It can also help employees who are in recovery stay alcohol- and drug-free:

- Treat employees with respect.
- Find out what motivates the people who report to you.
- Recognize your team members' priorities outside of work.
- Be generous with praise and recognition.
- Encourage problem-solving, innovation, and collaboration.
- Have zero tolerance for harassment and bullying.
- Be an accessible and supportive coach.

For an employee who is in recovery, simply offering your support and asking how you can be helpful is likely to make a huge difference.

Watch, too, for any indications of resentment or hostility from teammates in response to the employee's behavior before getting treatment. Make it clear that if anyone has problems with another employee's performance, they should bring the matter up with you. Retaliation for past behavior can never be allowed.

Respect the employee's privacy.

As a manager, you may have privileged information about the employee's earlier alcohol- or substance-use problem that the employee's team members may not have. You may know that the employee's absence was for treatment, which is confidential medical information. Unless the employee permits you to share it, you have a responsibility to keep this information private.

Be careful with your own curiosity, too. The employee has no obligation to share details of their treatment.

Reduce stigma.

Understand that alcohol-use disorder and medical-use disorder are medical conditions, not personality flaws or moral failings. Recognize that the employee may be judged by others and stigmatized for their problem, even now that they are in recovery, and that negative words and shunning behavior can leave them feeling isolated and undervalued. Try not to let that be their experience in the workplace.

Share what you have learned about alcohol and substance use with all of your employees, if you can do it in a way that doesn't violate the privacy of the employee who is in recovery. Watch for negative language about people with substance-use problems, and correct it with more respectful language. ("Addict" is a negative and judgmental label. "Person with a substance-use disorder" is more accurate and respectful.)

Be prepared for and deal with relapse.

Recovery is not always a smooth journey. As with other chronic diseases, recovery from alcohol or substance-use disorder can involve lapses or recurrences—temporary backsliding into former behaviors. It can also involve *relapse*—a full resumption of the addictive behavior.

Know that there is a difference between a lapse and a relapse. If your employee has one bad day, that's not necessarily the end of their recovery. They may be able to get right back on track, perhaps with some additional counseling or by reconsidering the approach to treatment. It's not your business to diagnose the problem or know how they get back on track. Your role is to be clear about performance expectations and fair in calling attention to performance problems. With clear, timely, and constructive communication about work performance, you may be able to help the employee recognize a problem before it gets out of control.

If your employee does have a relapse, that's not necessarily the end of recovery either. As long as no policies have been violated and no one has been put at risk, you might give the employee the chance to renew treatment or try a different treatment approach. It's in both of your interests that the employee succeed, both at work and in their efforts to manage their alcohol- or substance-use problem in their life outside of work.

The sooner your employee can get back into recovery, and the longer they are able to stay in recovery, the better their long-term outlook.

For More Information

"Accommodating Workers with a History of Substance Abuse," Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). By L. Nagele-Pizza, July 21, 2017.

<https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/legal-and-compliance/state-and-local-updates/pages/accommodating-workers-with-a-history-of-substance-abuse.aspx>

"Alcoholism in the Workplace: A Handbook for Supervisors." Office of Personnel Management (OPM).

<https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/worklife/reference-materials/alcoholism-in-the-workplace-a-handbook-for-supervisors>

"Employing and Managing with Addictions," SHRM. January 12, 2018.

<https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/personswithaddictions.aspx>

"Workplace Supported Recovery Program." National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). Page last reviewed July 27, 2020.

<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/opioids/wsrp/default.html>

Morgan, H. (2021, October). *Managing an employee who is in recovery from an alcohol- or substance-use problem* (C. Meeker & B. Schuette, Eds.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.

Disclaimer: This document is intended for general information only. It does not provide the reader with specific direction, advice, or recommendations. You may wish to contact an appropriate professional for questions concerning your particular situation.

{MSG1} Content ID: 100851