



# Supervisor NEWSLETTER

Employee Assistance Program  
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## Ways To Help an Employee Battling Alcoholism

Adapted from an article by Sam Rosenthal, BS

**Research shows that nearly 15 million Americans have an alcohol use disorder, the clinical term for an alcohol addiction or alcoholism, meaning most employers will someday encounter alcoholism in the workplace.**

Employee alcoholism can have a negative effect on productivity and workplace safety, but there are ways to help employees who are battling alcohol addiction so they can return to productivity.

### Identifying Signs of Alcoholism

There are some common signs of substance abuse, as well as specific signs associated with alcohol addiction. Consider these signals if you are concerned about employee alcoholism:

- **Signs of Hangover:** According to experts, some signs of a hangover include irritability, anxiety, tiredness, slurred speech, weakness, thirst, headache, achy muscles, sweating, upset stomach and sensitivity to light and sound. An employee who frequently reports to work with some of these symptoms may be experiencing alcoholism.
- **Smell of Alcohol:** One of the symptoms of an alcohol use disorder is being unable to give up drinking, so someone with alcoholism may be unable to stop drinking in time to get rid of the scent of alcohol on their breath or clothing before work.

- **Frequent Gum-Chewing or Use of Mints:** Because people with an alcohol use disorder may come to work smelling like alcohol, they may use gum or mints to try to mask the scent of alcohol on their breath. If someone uses these products excessively or disappears to the bathroom or car to use them throughout the workday, this can be a cause for concern, especially if you notice other signs of alcohol abuse.
- **Caught Drinking During Lunch Break:** An employee struggling with alcoholism may drink during the workday because of strong cravings or alleviate alcohol withdrawal symptoms after several hours without alcohol.
- **Prone to Workplace Accidents/Clumsiness:** Someone living with an alcohol use disorder may come to work under the influence or drink during the workday, which can lead to accidents or clumsiness if they are intoxicated while on the job.
- **Aggressive Behavior and Memory Lapse:** Some people may become aggressive while intoxicated. They may experience blackouts from heavy alcohol use, which can lead to memory lapses.

### Remote Work, COVID-19 and Alcoholism

Working remotely can bring unique challenges around alcoholism at work. Employees coping with isolation and loneliness while working remotely may turn to alcohol to cope. A recent study found that 55% of American adults increased their alcohol use during the COVID-19 pandemic, with 53% reporting they did so to cope with stress. Working from home can create additional anxiety during an already difficult time.

Employees working remotely may also escalate their alcohol use because of the privacy of working from home. They may be more likely to drink in the evenings

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since they don't report to the office. They may consume alcohol during the workday with less chance of being caught drinking on the clock.

This can be a complex issue for employers to address, but remote workers can be held accountable for substance abuse, even if they are not physically in the office. An employee being paid for work who does not complete it violates company policy, even if they are drinking from the privacy of home. It is essential that this fact is clearly communicated to remote employees. It may be helpful to delineate specific substance abuse policies that pertain to remote work.

### Ways To Support Employees

If you notice symptoms of alcoholism at work, supporting your employees protects the workplace and ensures their well-being. Addressing the issue can help them maintain their health and return to being productive at work.

Having a conversation with your employee about their alcohol use can be unpleasant, but it does not have to be. Addressing alcoholism in the workplace is possible if you keep these tips in mind:

- **Do research and have facts ready:** take time to understand alcoholism before speaking with your employee. When you are ready to talk, come prepared with facts. Instead of expressing an opinion like "You have been drinking too much," come with objective statements like, "You have shown up to work late three times during the last month, and each time, you have smelled like alcohol."
- **Use compassion:** you are likely to face some resistance or denial from the employee involved. Meet this denial with compassion and understanding. Instead of using a harsh or accusatory tone, express concern for the employee's well-being.
- **Remind the employee that alcoholism is a disease:** There is a stigma surrounding addiction that may make an employee hesitant to seek treatment. It can help to remind your employee that alcohol use disorder is a legitimate medical condition that causes changes in the brain and requires treatment, just like any other health problem does.

### Return-to-Work Agreements

Another helpful way to offer addiction recovery support in the workplace is to allow employees to participate in a return-to-work agreement. These agreements, also called last chance agreements, are not required by law but give employees a second chance when they have violated a company policy about substance abuse. They stipulate conditions an employee must follow to keep their jobs when they have violated workplace policy. For example, an employee who violates policy by coming to work under the influence may be given a return-to-work agreement that states that they must complete treatment and remain sober to avoid termination.

A return-to-work agreement shows that you as an employer value recovery and want to offer employees a chance to get treatment to address alcohol-related problems that have caused work performance issues. While the law may not require return-to-work agreements, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines both current and former alcoholism as a disability, meaning that an employee struggling with an alcohol use disorder has legal protections and a right to reasonable accommodations at work.

### Employee Assistance Programs

You can also support employees with alcoholism by referring to the employee assistance program or EAP. The EAP can provide education, support, counseling, and refer employees to other services as needed.

### Be a Resource

Addressing alcoholism in the workplace also means being a resource to your employees. Create a climate where they are comfortable talking to you about personal struggles because they know you will be understanding and offer them support. This does not mean that you condone dangerous behavior like alcohol abuse in the workplace; it simply means that you create a nonjudgmental environment where employees can receive help for problems instead of being punished.

### References:

<https://www.ridgefieldrecovery.com/blog/how-to-support-an-employee-battling-alcoholism/>