



Training and Supporting Supervisors in Addressing Substance Use

Supervisors play a critical role in addressing substance use in the workplace. They are often the first to notice a difference in an employee's performance, personality and activities. They may also be the first to notice impairment. It is imperative to provide supervisors with the tools they need to protect worker safety and health while also maintaining employee privacy.

In the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, supervisors should be prepared to engage with their employees more frequently, and possibly on more personal topics than typical. For example, employees may be experiencing extreme stress linked to social instabilities (housing, financial, food, family dynamics) that would not typically be shared with a manager or supervisor. Supervisors will need extra training and assistance as they support their employees.

Working With Your Employees

In general, here are some things you can do to support your employees.¹

- Provide comfort and address basic needs
- Be aware that some employees may have families and loved ones who are requiring additional attention; ask your employees how they are managing their work and family/non-work lives and how you can provide support
- Alternatively, be aware that some employees may be socially isolated outside of work, and ask how you can provide support
- Listen and stay connected to your staff and validate their feelings
- Remember you are a role model – continue to take care of your own social, physical and psychological needs
- Think about ways of decreasing additional non-essential demands on your staff to free them up to do the most critical work
- Communicate well and often – reduce uncertainty as much as possible as it causes immense stress and fear

¹ Adapted from <https://www.ohsu.edu/sites/default/files/2020-03/Manager%20Support%20COVID%2019%20Leslie%20Hammer%2003272020.pdf>

Training Topics

Keep in mind there are many other causes of impairment than substance use alone. Stress, mental health and fatigue are impairing conditions that must be acknowledged and addressed. All three of these other conditions are likely to be exacerbated due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Supervisors should be trained on the following:

- Understanding substance use disorders (SUDs) and their relationship to worker health and impairment
- Understanding acute and chronic stress and their relationship to worker health and impairment
- Understanding fatigue and its relationship to worker health and impairment
- Understanding mental health conditions and their relationship to worker health and impairment
- Recognizing signs of impairment and how to respond to an impairment-related crisis
- Recognizing the signs and symptoms of stress, depression and substance misuse in team members and encourage them to seek help from qualified mental health and/or addiction professionals
- Listening skills, emotional intelligence and/or mental health first aid
- The organization's Drug Free Workplace Policy (DFWP) and how it relates to impairment; communicating with employees about impairment, the DFWP and where they can go for more information
 - Drug testing procedures and other testing procedures related to impairment; required procedures and documentation when workplace impairment is observed
- Knowledge of appropriate resources to offer employees who need to address problematic substance use as well as stressors that can cause impairment – family, financial, education/training, performance demands, etc.

Recognizing Impairment During COVID-19

Training supervisors to recognize impairment is essential to protect the safety of the organization. Many supervisors and managers have teams who are constructed differently than they were prior to the pandemic – a fully remote workforce, a downsized workforce, a workforce whose priorities and day-to-day tasks may have shifted, etc. This means recognizing physical signs of impairment may be more difficult. However, behavior and performance changes can still be noticed.

Impairment can manifest in different ways:

- Physical signs and symptoms, including a rapid shift in physical appearance, tremors, unsteady gait, loss in manual dexterity, working in an unsafe manner, or the odor of alcohol or other drugs
- Concerning or changing behavior patterns, such as inappropriate verbal or emotional responses or behaviors, unusual irritability, memory lapses, unusual isolation from colleagues, lack of concentration, confusion, forgetfulness or lying
- Job performance changes, including calling in sick frequently, unexplained tardiness, early departure, extended breaks, errors in judgment, deterioration in performance and quality of work, or testing positive on a drug screen

In particular, those who are managing newly remote workforces will need to rely heavily on observing behavior changes and job performance changes. Though these signs, symptoms and behavior changes do not necessarily mean that someone is impaired or has an SUD, they are cause for concern. Avoid jumping to conclusions about *why* someone is acting differently, but make sure to address the situation. See [Opioids, Safety and Impairment](#) to learn more.

When Impairment or Distress is Observed

Impairment in the workplace is a serious safety concern. It will take a team effort, compassion and trust to ensure the COVID-19 pandemic does not put the mental health and safety of your employees at risk.

- Learn to recognize the signs and symptoms of impairment or distress
- Always abide by workplace policies and procedures about impairment
- Communicate relevant policies and policy changes to your employees; stay up to date on all COVID-19 information
- Encourage a culture of trust and set a tone that it is OK to seek help when in need

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people are stressed, fatigued and experiencing unprecedented levels of pressure at home and at work. Circumstances and expectations may be different throughout the course of the pandemic. It is the organization's responsibility to provide safe working conditions, support and flexibility to employees as they live through the pandemic and its effects. It is the employee's responsibility to reach out if extra support is needed to cope at home or at work.