



Treatment and Recovery During COVID-19

Substance use disorders (SUDs) are complex, with biological, psychological, and social causes and factors that can complicate treatment. However, SUDs are a treatable medical condition, and the odds of recovery are remarkable. In fact, more than 10% of Americans live in recovery.¹ Treatment may include medications, behavioral health counseling and other services to help patients reduce or stop alcohol and other drug use, and address related physical or mental health problems. Learn more about different types of treatment therapies, such as medication assisted treatment (MAT) and behavioral health treatment at [Understanding Treatment and Recovery](#).

For most people, use of medications in combination with behavioral health treatment is most effective when recovering from an opioid use disorder (OUD).² Ensuring your healthcare plans cover all types of treatment is critical to ensuring your employees can access the help they need.

With COVID-19, there are two angles to consider. One, there may be an increase in employees needing treatment after the initial crisis has passed as a result of problematic substance use during the pandemic, relapse, etc. Planning ahead can prevent higher impacts. Secondly, there may be employees in your workforce who were currently in treatment who may be experiencing decreased or interrupted services.

Recovery

Recovery begins when a person regains control over their opioid or substance use disorder and begins to live a healthy, productive life. It is important to remember that:

- Recovery is a personal journey, and is as unique as individual substance use disorders
- Relapse is a natural part of recovery. Recovering from an OUD or SUD may include making significant lifestyle changes that may be difficult to maintain.

¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29055821>

² <https://www.samhsa.gov/medication-assisted-treatment/treatment#medications-used-in-mat>

One component of a successful recovery is having gainful employment. Being employed offers the opportunity to make progress toward realization of goals, improved familial and social relationships, rebuilt financial stability, restoration of self-confidence and a contribution to society among many other benefits. Employers play a very important role in helping employees in recovery by embracing people with SUDs. Doing so prevents feelings of stigma and isolation, and greatly improves an employee's chances of recovery. A supportive workplace environment can also help prevent relapse.

Employees who are in recovery have equal or lower health care costs, absenteeism and job turnover compared to employees who never report a SUD.³ Employers who help employees complete treatment are likely to see a high return on investment when working with employees throughout treatment to achieve recovery. Supporting employees in recovery creates clear reasons for job satisfaction and loyalty in the workforce.

Recovery and COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, you may have employees in recovery who are being impacted by service disruption (counseling or medications are less accessible, appointments canceled, support groups unable to meet, daily routine disruption), and you may see an increase in the need for recovery support in the workplace – in other words, an increased need for a recovery-friendly workplace.

Continuing to prioritize these policies, procedures and interventions as workplaces evolve during COVID-19 is critical – frequent communications, supervisor training on emotional intelligence and listening skills, and a consistent prioritization will be necessary to avoid these efforts getting lost in the shuffle.

Recovery-friendly workplaces support their communities by recognizing recovery from a substance use disorder (SUD) as a strength, and by being willing to work intentionally with people in recovery. These workplaces encourage a healthy and safe environment where employers, employees and communities can collaborate to create positive change and eliminate barriers for those affected by addiction.⁴

How to Build a Recovery-Friendly Workplace

All components described in the [NSC Opioids at Work Employer Toolkit](#) support a recovery-friendly workplace. These include having buy-in from leadership and employees alike, providing supportive policies and programs such as EAPs, creating return-to-work plans, supporting employees who need treatment or leave, providing health care benefits that treat SUDs thoroughly and with the same resolve as physical illnesses and training supervisors to recognize warning signs. Additional actions include:

- Openly talking about COVID-19 and its impacts on mental health and substance use – emphasize that recovery is highly achievable with the right support, and that you will help support employees in their journey

³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29116987>

⁴ <https://www.recoveryfriendlyworkplace.com/initiative>

- Paying attention to your language – using stigmatizing language decreases the likelihood that an employee will seek help when needed
- Being supportive of others – providing support can help change someone’s life
- Knowing the facts – understanding SUDs reduces stigma and increases acceptance of SUDs as a medical condition from which one can recover
- Having wellness programs that promote and support employee health, work/life balance and wellbeing – stressful conditions such as COVID-19 can lead to unhealthy coping mechanisms, including substance use or relapse
- Continuing to emphasize your EAP or similar services, as well as other workplace support programs
- Encouraging healthy after-work activities
- Establishing relationships with local recovery community organizations and initiatives as a resource for employees (for example, recovery coaching or other support groups)