Recognizing Signs of Substance Abuse in the Workplace

Even though you must not try to diagnose the problem, there are many signs that may indicate a problem with alcohol or other drugs, which should trigger enactment of your Drug-Free Workplace policies and procedures.

Leave and Attendance
The following behavior related to leave or attendance may be indicative of a problem:
- Unexplained or unauthorized absences from work
- Frequent tardiness
- Excessive use of sick leave
- Patterns of absence such as the day after payday or frequent Monday or Friday absences
- Frequent unplanned absences due to “emergencies” (e.g., household repairs, car trouble, family emergencies, legal problems)

Performance Problems
The following performance issues may be indicative of a problem:
- Missed deadlines
- Careless or sloppy work or incomplete assignments
- Production quotas not met
- Many excuses for incomplete assignments or missed deadlines
- Faulty analysis

In jobs requiring long-term projects or detailed analysis, an employee may be able to hide a performance problem for quite some time.

Relationships at Work
The issues in interacting with coworkers may also be indicative of a problem:
- Relationships with coworkers may become strained
- The employee may be belligerent, argumentative, or short-tempered, especially in the mornings or after weekends or holidays
- The employee may become a "loner"

The employee may also have noticeable financial problems evidenced by borrowing money from other employees or receiving phone calls at work from creditors or collection companies.

Behavior at Work
The appearance of being inebriated or under the influence might include:
- Smelling of alcohol
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- Staggering or an unsteady gait
- Bloodshot eyes
- Mood and behavior changes such as excessive laughter and talking in an inappropriately loud manner
- Excessive use of mouthwash or breath mints
- Avoidance of supervisory contact, especially after lunch
- Tremors
- Sleeping on duty

Not any one of these signs means that an employee is a substance abuser. However, when there are performance and conduct problems coupled with any number of these signs, it is time to make a referral to the EAP for an assessment so that the employee can get help if it is needed. It is important to consult with your organization’s policy and procedures as well as enlist the consulting with Human Resources.