

Recognising possible alcohol or substance misuse

Misuse of drugs or alcohol can show in a wide variety of ways. As well as episodes of acute intoxication or drunkenness longer term misuse may show up as changes in a person's work or academic performance, their social behaviour or relationships or through deterioration in their appearance or self care.

Some of the more common signs of chronic misuse are listed below. None are specific to alcohol or drug misuse so you cannot assume this to be the cause. The effects of some medical conditions may cause a person to appear drunk or intoxicated. However you should not avoid discussing a valid concern over a person's performance or behaviour because of uncertainty over its cause.

Inadequate or erratic work performance

- Poor time keeping: frequent lateness, repeated short absences away from a person's normal work location
- Frequent sickness absence with minor illnesses e.g. colds, stomach upsets, headaches
- Poor concentration and forgetfulness
- Proneness to accidents- at work or at home
- Unreliability and unpredictability
- Mistakes or errors of judgment
- Improbable excuses for poor work performance

Changes in behaviour and appearance

- Mood changes, irritability, lethargy
- Hand tremor, slurred speech
- Excitable or inappropriate dis-inhibited behaviour
- Avoidance of eye contact
- Marked change in alertness or social behaviour after breaks
- Poor personal hygiene

Relationships with colleagues

- Over-reaction to real or imagined criticism
- Unreasonable resentment
- Avoidance of meetings
- Complaints from colleagues
- Borrowing money

Raising the issue

If you need to discuss a performance issue with colleague where you suspect that they may have an alcohol or substance misuse problem:

DO:

1. Prepare for the discussion – allow plenty of time.
2. Explain the reason for interview.
3. Focus on work issues: performance/attendance/relationship with colleagues
4. Be objective and factual, giving concrete, specific examples of problems
5. Acknowledge the person's positive contributions, past or present

6. Show concern for the person. Offer the opportunity for them to disclose in confidence any personal issues that may be affecting their performance, before deciding improvement targets
7. Explain exactly what the person must do to improve their work performance
8. Arrange a review meeting and stick to it.
9. Be firm and consistent with staff. Adopt the same general stance and follow the same procedure in every case

DO NOT:

1. Comment on the person's private life
2. Rely on subjective impressions or rumour for which documented evidence is lacking
3. Make vague accusations
4. Convey verbally or by your manner that you are judging the employee's morals
5. Ignore past or present achievements. Doing so might invite an accusation of unfairness
6. Argue with the person about their problems, or attempt to give advice outside of the work sphere.
7. Leave any room for uncertainty about the person's situation and what needs to be done to rectify it
8. Waiver between the heavy-handed exercise of authority and holding out the hand of friendship
9. Treat members of your staff inconsistently and make exceptions

DISCUSSING DRUG OR ALCOHOL USE

1. Do not accuse a person of having a drug and alcohol problem or require them to describe their use.
2. When discussing personal factors the member of staff thinks may be affecting their performance if he or she discloses that they have a drug or alcohol problem, offer the opportunity for them to obtain professional help and advice on this. Inform them that the College has a policy of supporting staff whilst they pursue help for a drug & alcohol problem, if present.
3. If the person discloses use of drugs or alcohol which they do not consider harmful, but which you think may be contributing towards their poor performance, express concern that it may be a factor and offer the opportunity of obtaining help and advice, as above.
4. If the person makes no relevant disclosure but you are still concerned that their performance might be impaired by drug or alcohol use, consider referring the person for an OH assessment for advice on whether there is an underlying health problem that may account for the performance difficulties observed

If you would like further advice on how to approach a discussion you can contact Confidential Care's Managerial Advice Line to talk it through with an experienced counsellor. The advice line is available during office hours, Monday to Friday on 0800 085 3805. For advice on application of the College Staff Drug and Alcohol Policy contact the HR Adviser for your department/ division.

REFERRAL FOR OH ASSESSMENT

Staff who disclose a problem with alcohol or drug misuse that is affecting them in their work should usually be referred to the College OH Service for assessment and advice: the person may need help to change behaviour, if damaging.

Their manager will benefit from an opinion on how alcohol or drug use may be affecting the person's performance, and advice on appropriate adjustments to support the member of staff whilst they pursue professional help, if needed and accepted.

A manager can also refer a staff member for OH assessment who does not disclose any alcohol or drug problem but where the manager still has grounds for concern over the person's performance and reasonable grounds for believing drug or alcohol misuse, or some health problem, may be a factor.

In both instances, referral for assessment can only take place if the person consents to being referred.

The report back to the manager will not necessarily directly address a person's use of alcohol or drugs: any disclosure on this to an OH Advisor will be covered by rules of medical confidentiality. However if a person's performance is being affected by drug or alcohol dependency and the person acknowledges this and is willing to accept professional help to overcome any dependency problems, the report will advise that their performance is being impaired by a valid health problem. It will also provide an opinion on prospects and timescale for recovery and advise on the need for sick leave or adjustments to enable the person cope with duties whilst pursuing treatment.

If, at OH assessment, a person does not disclose a drug or alcohol problem, or does not accept the need for professional help where, in the opinion on the OH Adviser, they need this to overcome harmful use of drugs or alcohol the report will advise there is no problem affecting performance that is amenable to medical intervention.

ACUTE INTOXICATION

If you are uncertain whether or not a person is intoxicated or drunk whilst at work, you can seek advice from an Occupational Health Adviser. Staff however cannot be required to be tested for the presence of drugs or alcohol.

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