

IN FOCUS: WELLNESS

# Addiction a costly workplace issue

*'We need to bypass our assumptions and preconceived notions': Expert*

By Danny Weill

**A**ddiction is a complex mental health issue and physical condition mired in myth and stigma.

Many people mistakenly think it is a only a problem for those who are weak-willed or lack self-control, but the truth is addiction has less to do with the substance or activity and more to do with how people cope — or fail to cope — with a serious issue in their lives.

It is estimated that close to eight million people suffer from addiction in Canada, and about one in five Canadians aged 15 years and older will experience a substance use disorder in their lifetime, according to the federal government.

Far from hurting only themselves, people struggling with addiction have a negative impact on those around them, from their personal circle to their community, as well as work colleagues and employers.

In fact, the cost of addiction to employers is huge. The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) reported in 2018 that substance abuse and addictions cost the Canadian economy \$15.7 billion dollars in lost productivity alone.

### Impact on the workplace

In addition to poor job performance, addiction in the workplace can lead to absenteeism, workplace turnover, low morale and increased insurance claims.

More tragically, it can also lead to theft, injury to self or others and even death.

However, employers have an opportunity to reduce the costs



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to their business while also helping to improve the wellbeing of employees.

Personal problems don't disappear when the workday begins, and it only makes sense that the more supported an employee is outside of work, the more resilient and productive she can be while at work.

This means having a robust employee wellness program that holistically addresses the spectrum of life's challenges — physical and mental — including topics such as suicide and addiction.

When it comes to substance use disorders, these programs, along with a supportive office culture, play a role in both reducing stigma and promoting prevention.

But there are additional ap-

proaches to ensure employees are fit for work and not under the influence.

### Recognizing the signs

It's crucial that HR teams and supervisors are able to identify the signs of addiction and know what to do about them, according to addiction specialist Adi Jaffe, who worked with LifeSpeak to create a series of employee-facing videos that address issues of addiction in the workplace.

"For starters, we need to bypass our assumptions and preconceived notions of what an addict looks like," says Jaffe. "We may tend to think they're older, maybe a minority status, and dishevelled. But these simply aren't true."

"Addiction starts early — usually in one's early or mid-20s — and can be present in their 70s. In the case of prescription drugs that leads to heroin use, for example, we see the highest rates are among young adult Caucasians."

The young mother, the superstar sales agent or the quiet accountant down the hall — any one of them could be suffering from an addiction.

And given the amount of time spent together, colleagues can be the first to notice something is wrong.

Signs to look out for include fairly sudden or extreme changes in personality and behaviour, such as:

- **Decreased attendance:** They're not showing up; they're late to

things they haven't been late to before; they're making excuses; they're always running out of time. Their scheduling and time management has changed substantially.

- **Increased conflict or irritability:** There are constant mood changes that didn't happen before, and increased conflict or irritability with others. People who take opiates, for example, may become irritable later in the day at work as the effects wear off.

- **Big changes in energy, sleep or eating:** These are huge predictors. Many drugs either depress or increase energy, and lead to immediate changes in levels. People who previously had normal appetites are suddenly skipping meals or eating much less.

- **Legal problems:** This is evident if people have legal issues they never had before, suddenly have

to go to court and they're hiding why, or maybe they had their licence suspended.

- **Money issues:** They might be short on rent, or not be able to make their car payment, or lack money for lunch. A sudden need for money when there's no event in their life that has predicted a huge amount of debt represents a red flag.

#### **What employers can do**

Once the problem is recognized, there is still the challenge of how to address it and how to create an environment that is free of judgment and shame, where people feel comfortable opening up about it.

Nobody wants to walk up to a boss or a colleague and say, "Hey, I think I'm struggling with cocaine, can you help me out?"

One of the important things to do is put a system in place where

somebody can — relatively anonymously — talk about the fact they have this problem, with somebody who is not directly related to their work chain, according to Jaffe.

So, that could mean an employee assistance program (EAP) or access to proactive educational content that encourages self-referral and actually provides the help they need.

In addition to addressing the issue through education — without judgment — and creating a confidential route to disclosure outside of an immediate supervisor, Jaffe recommends that employers:

- encourage individuals to report issues
- create a clear path for treatment without job loss
- reduce the presence of alcohol at work events to create a supportive environment
- create safe support and discussion

- opportunities to address stigma
- model positive behaviour by engaging management in stigma-reduction efforts.

EAPs are currently the most common intervention used in the workplace to address employee addiction.

However, a growing number of employers now offer educational programs as a complement, in order to provide greater preventative, rather than reactionary, tools.

The goal is to keep people employed and productive, while protecting them and the company from the costly consequences that results from job loss.

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