

Benefits

CANADA

As substance abuse rises amid pandemic, employers can help

Blake Wolfe | February 2, 2021



While workplaces around the world deal with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, many employees are also struggling with the secondary crisis of increased alcohol and drug use.

This particular side effect of the pandemic was noted early on. Last July, a poll by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health found 25 per cent of Canadians aged 35 to 54 and 21 per cent of those aged 18 to 34 had increased their alcohol consumption as a result of social distancing and self isolation. The organization also found Canadians who described their mental health as ‘fair’ or ‘poor’ were more likely than those with better mental health to have increased their use of alcohol, cannabis and tobacco during the early stages of the pandemic.

In a series of 2020 surveys focused on cannabis use, CAMH found nearly half of cannabis users increased their consumption, with an average frequency of four days per week.

Read: [Employee mental health, productivity remain low amid pandemic](#)

Since the start of the pandemic, there’s been a noticeable increase in calls for assistance with a substance issue, particularly alcohol, says Eric Rubel, national clinical director at Aspiria Corp. “An employee might talk to us because they’re dealing with depression or a relationship problem associated with the pandemic. That may be their primary presenting issue, but underlying that may be an alcohol or drug issue, because they’re finding they’re so anxious because of everything going on.”

With anxiety a key contributor to alcohol and drug consumption, employers can help their employees by minimizing stress through their workplace policies, says Mike Sullivan, chief executive officer of Cubic Health Inc. “If employers can acknowledge that and be creative in their remote-working arrangements, such as allowing people to work off-hours or on weekends, anything that can take off performance-related stress is a step in the right direction.”

Rubel says while recent lockdown measures have made in-person assessments difficult, an employer shouldn’t wait to talk to their employee if an issue is identified. “The good thing is because of video platforms, we still provide good assessments

through platforms like Teams or Zoom. If there are issues, it must be done sooner rather than later as these issues are progressive.”

Read: [Plan members using EAP, virtual care to support mental health during pandemic](#)

The increase in remote working has also made it more difficult for employers to identify an issue, says Karen Joudrey, an occupational therapist and part-time faculty member at Dalhousie University’s disability management program. As a result, she says they need to be on the lookout for telltale signs, adding that the easiest problem to prevent is one that doesn’t happen in the first place.

“Management needs to be sensitized to things like work quality slipping or people showing up late to meetings. They don’t have eyes on them right now since the majority of us are working from home. The minute there’s signs, managers need to get in there with all of their benefits tools, like [employee assistance programs].”

Reinforced alcohol and drug policies will continue to assist employers after the pandemic, she says, as staff who increased consumption while working remotely may find it hard to break the habit. “I don’t think it’ll slow down — the numbers [of coronavirus cases] are skyrocketing and so is anxiety. Even if it disappears overnight, it’ll take a long time for behaviours to change.”

It’s also important for employers to take a non-confrontational approach when addressing substance issues with staff and focus on an employee’s well-being and job performance, says Rubel. “[Managers should] ask about what issues the employee thinks may be eliciting that and give them the opportunity to express any concerns, as opposed to accusing them of a problem. The more a manager pushes, the more resistance they’ll face.”

Read: [Dealing with employee addictions](#)

Employers should also establish that there’s no repercussions for people seeking help and reiterate the available benefits, says Sullivan. “Addiction is the one area of mental health where stigmas haven’t decreased, like they have with anxiety and depression. Those disorders are at the top of the list for disability leave for most employers, so there may be strength in numbers.”

And looking forward, he says the pandemic will also likely lead to a reimagining of how mental-health benefits are viewed and delivered, particularly the limitations of virtual care in treating deep-seated psychological issues like addiction.

“Plan sponsors will have to build in tools that allow for the appropriate allotment of intensity of the intervention to the underlying problem. A lot of mental-health benefits are limited by the amounts. What if someone needs \$10,000 and another employee won’t even need any? Imagine if we did the same thing with medication. I’d like to see a world where there’s room for virtual mental-health care but also for more-involved, individualized solutions.”

Read: [How to help employees with substance abuse](#)

Copyright © 2021 Transcontinental Media G.P. Originally published on benefitscanada.com
