Getting help and returning to work

Early intervention

Managers, supervisors, and team leaders are well placed to identify:

1. workers experiencing alcohol and drug problems
2. working conditions which may contribute to risky alcohol and drug use.

! **Don't wait until a workplace problem arises to speak with workers about their alcohol and/or drug use, mental health, or work/life stressors.**

Identify at-risk and vulnerable workers and:

- take preventative steps to identify and address workplace factors that can contribute to risky alcohol and drug behaviours and poor mental health
- inform workers about workplace supports available to help avoid problems or seek treatment and counselling.

Intervene if you notice a worker is:

- having difficulties coping with or neglecting their work responsibilities
- regularly feeling physically and/or mentally unwell
- having unexplained and repeated absences or late starts
- talking to co-workers about their personal struggles
- coming to work impaired by alcohol and/or drugs.

Early warning indicators of risky alcohol and drug use

- Increased irritability, anger, emotionality
- Rapid mood changes
- Withdrawal from usual activities and social situations
- Frequent lateness or absences
- Production of poor quality or less work than usual
- Unusual mistakes
- Looking unwell, dishevelled, untidy or unclean
- Sleepiness and/or fatigue
- Incoherence
- Euphoria

Follow the Poster: [10 Principles for Responding to Intoxicated Workers](#) if a worker is agitated, pacing, and using threatening gestures or language.

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Intervene early to prevent a situation becoming worse by:

- promptly investigating complaints about working conditions (physical hazards, workloads, poor working relationships) and taking measures to minimise risk
- training supervisors or co-workers to recognise early warning signs that individuals may be experiencing problems
- creating a respectful workplace
- maintaining confidentiality when workers disclose sensitive or personal information
- being aware of services where workers can be referred for assistance.

Refer to counselling or treatment services

Workers experiencing alcohol- or drug-related problems may require:

- encouragement and support to identify a problem
- assistance to seek treatment
- advice about the workplace supports available so they can attend treatment or reduce their stress (e.g., leave provisions, accessing insurance and/or income support, rostering changes, return to work adjustments)
- referral to counselling or treatment services
- time-off work to attend medical appointments and/or treatment and counselling services
- regular meetings with managers, supervisors, or team leaders to discuss workplace supports and/or stressors
- assurance that their privacy and confidentiality will be respected and maintained, and that accessing treatment will not jeopardise their employment prospects.

See How-to-Guides:

- Having Helpful Conversations for advice about how to approach and speak with workers about sensitive matters.

- Critical Alcohol and Drug Situations for advice about how to approach and manage intoxicated and/or aggressive workers.

Provide workers with copies of the Getting Help Posters so they can identify suitable treatment and counselling services.

Recovery

The possibility of returning to paid work can motivate workers to seek and complete treatment. However, they might also be experiencing depression, anxiety, or fatigue from the withdrawal process or feel judged and embarrassed about returning to work.

Recovery and rehabilitation from any injury or illness should aim for the worker to return to work as soon as they are fit and able to do so.

Return to work is more likely to be successful when the worker's connection to the workplace is maintained throughout their recovery.

To support return to work, its important that the supervisor maintains regular contact with the worker while they recover.

Feelings of low self worth may be exacerbated if a serious alcohol- and/or drug-related incident precipitated treatment.

Support workers to return to work by:
- scheduling regular check-up sessions
- promoting a safe, supportive work environment.

What is a safe, supportive work environment?

Managers, supervisors, and team leaders should:

1. be approachable and genuinely interested in their workers' job pathways, achievements, and problems
2. foster respectful and trusting relationships with and between workers
3. show commitment to worker wellbeing by:
   - proactively addressing workplace hazards and risks
   - monitoring and balancing workload expectations and stressors
   - distributing shift work to minimise fatigue and maximise work/family time
   - encouraging healthy consumption, work, rest, and play behaviours.

Return to work

The advantages of a worker seeking treatment and returning to work are:

- Reduced costs of recruitment, retraining and lost time
- The workplace may benefit from the skills possessed by the worker
- Successful return to work is likely to improve recovery
- Successful return to work practices contribute to a supportive workplace culture.

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Planning a successful return to work

Similar to return to work following an injury, return to work following an alcohol or drug disorder requires planning and monitoring to ensure the worker's safety and fitness for work, and the safety of others.

Most workplaces have a return to work policy for work-related physical and mental injuries. These same principles apply to a worker returning from alcohol- and drug-related treatment.

See Return to Work SA's recovery and return to work plan for more information.

Resources and handouts are available at https://worklife.flinders.edu.au/external-site-resources.

References are available at https://worklife.flinders.edu.au/references.