



Substance Misuse and My Workplace

– What Can I Do About It?

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The dilemmas we face in the course of our jobs are sometimes unavoidable yet often predictable. However, consequences from the use of substances that impair our judgement and behaviour need not be a complication present in our workplace.

We know that impairment at work, due to substance misuse, does happen. We know it has a negative impact on the work environment. We know it can affect colleagues and students. We know it can, and sometimes does, have serious implications for the user. We know all this, but do we know the answers to the questions: “What can I do about it?” or “Why should I do anything about it?”

Substance Misuse

Let’s start with naming the elephant in the room! When we hear the words *Substance Abuse* or *Misuse*, we tend to automatically think of alcohol. Unfortunately, in addition to alcohol, there are many other substances which are misused and can lead to complications in the workplace. Illegal drugs are an issue in some workplace settings, but also of great concern in any workplace is the misuse of prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) medication.

The caution on medication packages, which warns against driving or operating machinery after taking the drug, is a serious warning! Using some common medications for cold relief or muscle relaxation can result in impaired judgement, coordination and reflex time. Although being at school while taking cold remedies may pose more of an issue for transmitting germs than of having slower reflex times, driving to or from school may be a significant issue. The use of many drugs can present with “impaired” behaviours.

This “misuse” of medication can be unintentional and may occur because we are not careful enough. However, “misuse” can also be deliberate. Prescription and OTC medication can be used to achieve the drug’s side effects! When this behaviour occurs frequently, it becomes a habit that is maintained due to a developed substance addiction.

It is also important to note that alcohol use, or misuse, in the evening or night can significantly affect performance at work the next day. The “hang-over” which causes observable physical symptoms isn’t the only effect. There may still be unprocessed alcohol circulating in the body which can be measured at a legal impairment level. Being at school while “under the influence” of alcohol is definitely an invitation for trouble. Unclear speech, confusion, unsteadiness, fatigue and poor judgement are signs warranting concern and immediate action. If alcohol isn’t the cause, something else is!

Bystander Response

When impairment is noticed, the view that “someone else will handle it” is a common response to such uncomfortable situations. We hope that someone else will see and resolve the situation. That happens at home, in public and at work. Although it is a common response, it is not a helpful one. Individuals have been left to die because we don’t want to get involved. We justify our complacency by convincing ourselves that we would be interfering with someone else’s life; that we don’t have the skills and would cause more harm; or, that we are putting our own security at risk. The reality is that when individuals are experiencing distress, they may not be able to make the best decisions for themselves. They may need external intervention in order to access support.

Enabling Behaviours

This refers to behaviours such as: covering up, making excuses, picking up the slack and basically “hiding the evidence” to minimize the consequences for a colleague or friend. We may not realize that this further perpetuates the problem and increases the risks for the friend. We are now supporting someone to continue their problematic behaviour.

When our coping level is low, we may engage in inappropriate or harmful behaviours that provide some positive effect, whether that effect is: distraction from a negative reality, pleasure, or avoidance of

something unpleasant. These behaviours can become a habit, which we tend to continue doing until we are caught! Being caught may mean that we have caused unintended and undesired consequences for ourselves or others, or it may mean that someone else may bring the situation to our “public” attention.

Our response to, and actions after, “being caught” may vary from one person to another and will depend on several things. Responses may range from denial to sorrow to asking for help! In the absence of concrete, measurable evidence, we may deny to others and ourselves that there is a problem. If we are dependent on the substance, even in light of strong evidence, we may deny substance use or problems. If we are already experiencing problems, we may be willing to acknowledge that our behaviours are having a negative impact on our performance, health or relationships but we may not be ready, or able, to commit to making changes. Although we express regret, we may not want to give up the behaviours. The most beneficial response and subsequent actions would be the open recognition of problematic behaviours and the acceptance of responsibility for initiating steps to create change.

Unfortunately, if others take our consequences, they enable us to continue unchallenged with our potentially harmful actions. Logic would lead us to several conclusions if these behaviours continue. We can assume that over time: the unchecked, at-risk activity may increase; the risk of negative consequences increases; and, the potential for harm to self and others increases.

The Concerned Colleague

Being the concerned colleague is a much more helpful role than being the oblivious bystander. However, if you choose to speak to a colleague or friend about your perception of their behaviour, plan your interaction and be prepared for a reaction. Making contact may not be readily accepted so don't take the rejection of your concern as a personal affront.

Do not approach the colleague with the assumption that you know what's wrong and how to fix it! The only thing that you may definitively know, is that the colleague is behaving unusually or inappropriately for the workplace. In private, you can bring that to their attention and offer to help or listen.

You may be surprised with the response. You may learn that the colleague is going through a major life trauma, that there has been a history of difficulty in coping or there is a long-standing substance misuse issue. Or, more likely, you may get the response that “everything is fine” or whatever is bothering your colleague is “none of your business”. Remember that

although you have been planning your contact, you have unexpectedly made an uninvited approach. Even if your offer is refused, you have been successful in drawing attention to the fact that your colleague's behaviour is apparent to others and that assistance is available. This may encourage the colleague to think more about the situation, to seek further information, or to obtain assistance.

Creating Change

Personal change only occurs when we are so uncomfortable in a situation that we are willing to do the necessary work to make things different. Creating that change will also be an uncomfortable and difficult process; however, we finally perceive that discomfort as being worth it! There are clearly defined steps and supports available to assist in engaging and sustaining the process of change.

Obligations

Under the Occupational Health & Safety Act, the employer (the School Board) has an obligation to provide a safe work environment. Under the School's Act, the Board has a right to remove employees from the workplace if they believe that the employees may cause harm to themselves or others. If behaviours are a threat to safety, or are deemed to be inappropriate to the workplace, the Board may take action. This intervention has often led to individuals finally facing their issues and accessing needed support.

Resources

If you are in a negative personal or workplace situation, or are aware of a colleague in one, you do have options in accessing assistance. There are community and professional resources available to discuss the options and offer direction. A first step can be to go directly to the specific support by contacting your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) Coordinator or www.addictionhelpnl.ca. However, you may feel more comfortable making your first connection with someone you already know. To receive information or encouragement to go further, you may want to speak with: your school administrator, guidance counsellor or colleague; the NLTA School Representative or NLTA staff person; or even your school nurse! Your initial goal is to find out where to go for the assistance you want. Find someone you trust and ask the necessary questions!

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