An exclusive report for myEmployer members

How to help employees struggling with addiction

February 2023

Contents

Introduction
Meet our Experts
What is addiction
Is addiction a medical condition?
What causes addiction?
Who's impacted by addiction?
What's the difference between habitual and addiction?
How do you spot the signs?
How to approach addiction
Should you fire someone who's addicted?
Help vs judgment – Creating a safe environment
Signposting and help

Introduction

Addiction is an incredibly taboo topic – it's one that has been stifled by governments worldwide on various 'wars on drugs' and in the stereotypes of hurtful, unkind habitual users and society. While that image may reflect what some have lived through, it's important to understand that addiction can impact everyone, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic background.

In fact, just taking into account only one type of addiction – drug use disorders – the US National Institute of Health reports that 10% of adults in the US suffer a drug disorder at some point in their life.

The cost to the UK of alcohol and drug addiction (to the level that interferes with work) is estimated at £4.3 billion annually, while it amounts to £25 billion for drugs, with the alcohol cost at about £50 billion.

And in addition to gambling, the rise in numbers in the past few years (the estimate of those referred for treatment in 2022 rose by 85%, according to the NHS England has meant that the NHS has had to open two new clinics last year, just for the treatment of this addiction.

While the causes of addiction are for psychologists and medical doctors to determine, it's important that HR teams are aware of the impact relationships and family relationships. With one in ten of the UK's workers now working mostly remotely, it can be difficult to spot – and if it's hard to spot, is it something HRBPs can effectively help with? It bears quoting.

For now, the aim of this report is to dispel some of the myths about addiction and to provide some practical guidance on how to support your employees at all levels if they're struggling with this.

Harriet Hunter, a retired addiction counsellor, sums up HR's delicate balancing act perfectly: "There has been and continues to be an anti-substance use disorder issue that bleeds into the workplace," she says. "Employers, HR teams and managers need to be aware of it and have the perfect breeding ground for chronic dependence behaviours to and out of the workplace."

In particular, all of our experts have noted one thing that there is still a huge amount of stigma surrounding addiction. The stigma carries with it social shame and the aspects of the taboo, which in turn leads to further behaviour and hiding the addiction, making reaching out for support all the tougher.

Dealing with employees who live in the workplace, management's ability to ask questions and discuss vulnerable consequences, regardless of the employee's action, carries a delicate weight, often making the difference between not just hard feelings, but also potential litigation/ Tribunal cases.

"Behaving, intervening and ferreting out the right questions becomes paramount to ensure the safeguarding of the employee, the employer, clients, and overall behaviour," she concludes.

That's why to create a safe environment, both personally and professionally, it's important to educate yourself on addiction, bring an open mind, understanding and empathy, while also providing you with the right tools to help someone who is struggling with addiction. And that's where this report comes in.

Meet our Experts

Peter M. Vernig, Ph.D, MBA
VP of Behavioral Services
Recovery Centers of America

Dr. Hana Patel
Medical GP and Counsellor

James Hartley
Counsellor and Psychotherapist

Dr. Bertrina Olivia West Al-Hilfeld Ph.D.
Author of "Addiction Recovery Guide" Co-Author of the Rex Counselling

Kevin Catalli
CEO of Renaissance Recovery

Victoria Ree Dos Santos
Senior Group Risk Consultant at Rech

Bobbi Klauss
HR Advisor

Annie Gale
Head of EAP Team and Apprenticeships at CCGM

Christopher Paul Jones
Counselor and Photo Expert

Harriet Hunter
Retired Addiction Counsellor

What is addiction?

"Anything in our lives that we have no control over doing, taking or using to the point where it impacts our day-to-day activities and happiness" is a home for a variable definition of addiction, that it's important to note that actual use of something – even if it's something we disapprove of, or that carries a stigma – isn't the same as being addicted to it.

To understand addiction, we need to ask ourselves, "What is the relationship I have to an activity? Am I best without it? Is it ultimately harming myself and others in the long term?"

Counsellor and photo expert Christopher Paul Jones says addiction can manifest in many ways, but it's all about the relationship we have with things, mainly to attempt to change the way we're feeling. This can be through drink, gambling, illegal or prescription drugs, sex, shopping, exercise, caffeine and even time spent on social media.

Counsellor and psychotherapist James Hartley has spent more than 5,000 hours counselling people with addiction issues, and he says that, "Addiction is a strong healthy food, passion for not yet, everything, too. What we're dealing with is complex, and that ever experts aren't sure how to classify it.

"As a therapist, I try to help people view addiction as a dependence on something which is soothing in some way for them that ultimately, can have negative consequences for them and those around them. It's a coping mechanism, a way of dealing with pain, pressure and stress, and it's important to be concerned about primarily in this respect, though, are the areas where the addiction is interfering with our happiness and/or causing issues at work.

While once upon a time, the approach was one of 'all or nothing' with addiction, with the rise of mindfulness and understanding of the brain's rewiring through practicing neurotypic we now know that the reasons for addiction are myriad and that treatments for it often need to extend to treating the core reasons, not simply just zoning in on the relationship to the addiction item in question.

One of the most startling realisations, in fact, is that often, addiction is merely the subsequent by-product of deeper, debilitating issues.

"Looking from the outside, addiction may be seen as a weakness and lack of grit," says Harley. "We have to understand that it is often a way of coping a person has found to difficult circumstances in life which they have yet to find healthy, productive, powerful ways to cope. For example, alcohol can be used to cope with social anxiety."

He continues: "Secrecy and shame go hand-in-hand with addiction. Often people know they have a problem and try desperately to stop, but because they cannot connect with alternatives, and are disconnected from support systems, they feel ashamed, and the addiction then becomes a vicious, dismissing and – since they lack alternatives to self-soothing distress – an all-reason to continue self-soothing via the addiction.

Is addiction a medical condition?

While there have been studies that show genetic factors are at play when it comes to addictions to alcohol and nicotine, and that certain neurological conditions, such as ADHD, OCD and Bipolar Disorder II can often make people more prone to addiction, there hasn't been a definitive answer to addiction being a medical condition. The World Health Organisation does class alcohol addiction as a medical condition, whether we or organisations like it or if it developed in environment. Like many things, the nature vs nurture argument isn't nearly as important as understanding each individual case, and what's needed for recovery.

What we do know is that addiction can be a variety of things and affect almost anyone.

And most importantly, addiction is treatable.

In the US, clinically, addiction is called substance use disorders (SUD), with the National Institute of Health stating that treatment for SUD can be "as effective as treatment for other chronic diseases" by helping a patient stability to control their use of substances such as legal or illegal drugs, alcohol, or medications. Symptoms can range from moderate to severe, with addiction being the most severe form of SUD.

Renaissance Recovery CEO Kevin Catalli has faced and overcome addiction himself and, along with the leadership team at Renaissance in California, works every day with people who are addicted.

He says that it's a common misconception "that addiction is a choice. However, once someone is addicted, it is not a choice anymore. Addiction is a disease that affects the way a person thinks, feels, chooses, and even if they choose to stop it can be dangerous or life-threatening."

Whether addiction is a disorder or disease remains to be seen, but where's what we do know:

- **There is no such thing as an addiction personality (it's just something people say), although there are people with low impulse control, which is often found alongside trauma, and both of these things can be part of addiction.**
- **Addiction is fully treatable and despite what unqualified by this I mean, not scientifically or medically proven methods, it is not a moral failure, it is not a character flaw, it is not a sign to be mad and/or fire. Defining myself as "10 always in recovery" and help some, but it's as damaging a concept as Original Sin, for others. How you approach recovery is your choice, and you should not feel forced to define or treat it only one way.**

What causes addiction?

As mentioned above, there are many root causes of addiction. In some instances, there can be a genetic predisposition to dependence on alcohol, drugs or other substances. The US National Institute of Health reports that "Research shows that about half of a person's risk for a predisposed to addiction, saying: "Family studies that include identical twins, fraternal twins, adoptees, and siblings suggest that as much as half of a person's risk of becoming addicted to nicotine, alcohol, or other drugs depends on his or her genetic makeup.

Of course, there are plenty of other factors at play, and just because one's parents or relatives have been addicted to something doesn't mean that it's a foregone conclusion that someone will be treatable and manageable, with the right help and supports, which we signpost in here.

Dr. Bertrina Olivia West Al-Hilfeld, or Dr. O for short, has spent many years counselling addicts and helping them understand the root cause.

"Many things can cause addiction," she posts. "Often, it's used as a coping mechanism to combat trauma, PTSD, or other issues. It can be a family thing, passed down from parents to children and on genealogy. While in many cases, it's built out of habit or a sense of pleasure or control."

The control aspect is one that impacts many people who were formally addicted to things such as self-harm, drugs or alcohol – they often simply replace those things with another, albeit far less harmful, addiction, such as running, observing ever food intake, nicotine or marijuana. While those things can help do good, it's important to understand that they can be addictive, too, and even if we've simply replaced one obsession with the other, and to continue to work on the root cause.

10%

of all adults will suffer a drug addiction disorder at some point in their lives

51%

of adults in drug treatment in the UK are being treated for opiate dependence

Cataldi does believe that genetics plays a part. He says: "One big factor is genetic predisposition. If your family members have struggled with addiction, it's possible that you will too. Another is development. If someone started using substances at a young age, they're more likely to become addicted later on in life. Environment too – if someone is surrounded by people who use or experience a traumatic experience that can increase their risk of becoming addicted.

"Mental health issues can also play a role. Many people struggle with addiction to themselves when someone is struggling with addiction there is an underlying mental health condition that has been untreated, some of the most common include depression, anxiety, and PTSD. We call this co-occurring disorders. If someone wants to get treatment for addiction, it's important to look for a place that does dual diagnosis that can root out only their addiction, but the underlying mental health condition that contributes to it.

One good lifestyle at the SEDA encourage those dealing with an addicted person to consider environment as well: "That old saying 'nature or nurture' might be better phrased 'nature and nurture' because research shows that a person's health is the result of dynamic interaction between genetics and environment."

The report, entitled Genetics and Epigenetics of Addiction, continues: "For example, a community that provides healthy after-school activities has been shown to reduce vulnerability to drug addiction, and data show that access to exercise can discourage drug-seeking behaviour, an effect that is more pronounced in males than in females.

"Exposure to drugs or stress in a person's social or cultural environment can also both gene expression and behavioral responses to drugs, which may increase or decrease risk for addiction. Research also suggests that genes can play a part in how a person responds to his or her environment, placing some people at higher risk for disease than others."

Social events at work

It can be difficult at any social event for someone who is in recovery or who has sought to consent with excessive alcohol consumption to attend a shift at work environment. This becomes a magnified problem for employers battling alcohol addiction and employers need to differentiate between alcohol misuse and dependency. Communication is key, and it's important to have a conversation about what's comfortable and what's not. Employers should also consider that not all company socials need to incorporate a drinking element. Although some work socials may involve alcohol, there should never be an expectation that employees need to drink. Instead, a work social should focus on building and bonding with colleagues.

– Victoria Ree Dos Santos

Who's impacted?

While those who suffer from addiction or dependence issues will be family and friends, it can obviously create problems at work.

Victoria Ree Dos Santos, whose job is to calculate the risk and cost of many things, including employees with addiction issue, says that the impact of addiction can be felt in many ways:

"There may be cases where the employee is hiding addiction or an addiction to their conditions, despite warning signs that might be picked up by line managers," she explains. "Addiction can impact work through drops in productivity, timekeeping, concentration and accuracy; in maintaining relationships with colleagues; in mood swings and in extreme cases, degrees. Fundamentally addiction impacts both mental health and physical health."

She advises that regular Health & Safety assessments will often identify cases where addiction is creating a safety risk in the workplace.

What's the difference between habitual and addiction?

Dr. O explains that while habitual use can still cause problems, the difference between habit and dependence is the amount of choice involved.

She shares her expertise in delineating between the two: "With addiction, individuals have a more challenging time with their choices because of the dependence and control the addiction has over their life. When something is habitual, it's done by rote, it's done because it's what we do, it's what we're around from. With addiction, you have to ask the trouble and harm their addiction is causing and may try to make an effort to stop. Still, due to their dependence on the substance, they will quickly fall back into the same patterns and behaviours they had before."

How do you spot the signs?

Many times our employees hide their addiction, or at least try to, because they feel ashamed, afraid, or even guilty. Addiction can impact both mental and physical health, and it can be difficult to spot if the person is in denial of their condition.

Victoria Ree Dos Santos, whose job it is to calculate the risk and cost of many things, including employees with addiction issue, says that the impact of addiction can be felt in many ways:

"There may be cases where the employee is hiding addiction or an addiction to their conditions, despite warning signs that might be picked up by line managers," she explains. "Addiction can impact work through drops in productivity, timekeeping, concentration and accuracy; in maintaining relationships with colleagues; in mood swings and in extreme cases, degrees. Fundamentally addiction impacts both mental health and physical health."

She advises that regular Health & Safety assessments will often identify cases where addiction is creating a safety risk in the workplace.

What's the difference between habitual and addiction?

Dr. O explains that while habitual use can still cause problems, the difference between habit and dependence is the amount of choice involved.

She shares her expertise in delineating between the two: "With addiction, individuals have a more challenging time with their choices because of the dependence and control the addiction has over their life. When something is habitual, it's done by rote, it's done because it's what we do, it's what we're around from. With addiction, you have to ask the trouble and harm their addiction is causing and may try to make an effort to stop. Still, due to their dependence on the substance, they will quickly fall back into the same patterns and behaviours they had before."

How to approach addiction

Harriet Hunter, a retired addiction counsellor, sums up HR's delicate balancing act perfectly: "There has been and continues to be an anti-substance use disorder issue that bleeds into the workplace," she says. "Employers, HR teams and managers need to be aware of it and have the perfect breeding ground for chronic dependence behaviours to and out of the workplace."

In particular, all of our experts have noted one thing that there is still a huge amount of stigma surrounding addiction. The stigma carries with it social shame and the aspects of the taboo, which in turn leads to further behaviour and hiding the addiction, making reaching out for support all the tougher.

Dealing with employees who live in the workplace, management's ability to ask questions and discuss vulnerable consequences, regardless of the employee's action, carries a delicate weight, often making the difference between not just hard feelings, but also potential litigation/ Tribunal cases.

"Behaving, intervening and ferreting out the right questions becomes paramount to ensure the safeguarding of the employee, the employer, clients, and overall behaviour," she concludes.

That's why to create a safe environment, both personally and professionally, it's important to educate yourself on addiction, bring an open mind, understanding and empathy, while also providing you with the right tools to help someone who is struggling with addiction. And that's where this report comes in.

Help vs judgment – Creating a safe environment

Cataldi says that the greatest gifts a peer, he says, "One big factor is genetic predisposition. If your family members have struggled with addiction, it's possible that you will too. Another is development. If someone started using substances at a young age, they're more likely to become addicted later on in life. Environment too – if someone is surrounded by people who use or experience a traumatic experience that can increase their risk of becoming addicted.

"Mental health issues can also play a role. Many people struggle with addiction to themselves when someone is struggling with addiction there is an underlying mental health condition that has been untreated, some of the most common include depression, anxiety, and PTSD. We call this co-occurring disorders. If someone wants to get treatment for addiction, it's important to look for a place that does dual diagnosis that can root out only their addiction, but the underlying mental health condition that contributes to it.

Our good friends at the SEDA encourage those dealing with an addicted person to consider environment as well: "That old saying 'nature or nurture' might be better phrased 'nature and nurture' because research shows that a person's health is the result of dynamic interaction between genetics and environment."

The report, entitled Genetics and Epigenetics of Addiction, continues: "For example, a community that provides healthy after-school activities has been shown to reduce vulnerability to drug addiction, and data show that access to exercise can discourage drug-seeking behaviour, an effect that is more pronounced in males than in females.

"Exposure to drugs or stress in a person's social or cultural environment can also both gene expression and behavioral responses to drugs, which may increase or decrease risk for addiction. Research also suggests that genes can play a part in how a person responds to his or her environment, placing some people at higher risk for disease than others."

Who's impacted?

While those who suffer from addiction or dependence issues will be family and friends, it can obviously create problems at work.

Victoria Ree Dos Santos, whose job it is to calculate the risk and cost of many things, including employees with addiction issue, says that the impact of addiction can be felt in many ways:

"There may be cases where the employee is hiding addiction or an addiction to their conditions, despite warning signs that might be picked up by line managers," she explains. "Addiction can impact work through drops in productivity, timekeeping, concentration and accuracy; in maintaining relationships with colleagues; in mood swings and in extreme cases, degrees. Fundamentally addiction impacts both mental health and physical health."

She advises that regular Health & Safety assessments will often identify cases where addiction is creating a safety risk in the workplace.

What's the difference between habitual and addiction?

Dr. O explains that while habitual use can still cause problems, the difference between habit and dependence is the amount of choice involved.

She shares her expertise in delineating between the two: "With addiction, individuals have a more challenging time with their choices because of the dependence and control the addiction has over their life. When something is habitual, it's done by rote, it's done because it's what we do, it's what we're around from. With addiction, you have to ask the trouble and harm their addiction is causing and may try to make an effort to stop. Still, due to their dependence on the substance, they will quickly fall back into the same patterns and behaviours they had before."

How do you spot the signs?

Many times our employees hide their addiction, or at least try to, because they feel ashamed, afraid, or even guilty. Addiction can impact both mental and physical health, and it can be difficult to spot if the person is in denial of their condition.

How to approach addiction

Harriet Hunter, a retired addiction counsellor, sums up HR's delicate balancing act perfectly: "There has been and continues to be an anti-substance use disorder issue that bleeds into the workplace," she says. "Employers, HR teams and managers need to be aware of it and have the perfect breeding ground for chronic dependence behaviours to and out of the workplace."

In particular, all of our experts have noted one thing that there is still a huge amount of stigma surrounding addiction. The stigma carries with it social shame and the aspects of the taboo, which in turn leads to further behaviour and hiding the addiction, making reaching out for support all the tougher.

Dealing with employees who live in the workplace, management's ability to ask questions and discuss vulnerable consequences, regardless of the employee's action, carries a delicate weight, often making the difference between not just hard feelings, but also potential litigation/ Tribunal cases.

"Behaving, intervening and ferreting out the right questions becomes paramount to ensure the safeguarding of the employee, the employer, clients, and overall behaviour," she concludes.

That's why to create a safe environment, both personally and professionally, it's important to educate yourself on addiction, bring an open mind, understanding and empathy, while also providing you with the right tools to help someone who is struggling with addiction. And that's where this report comes in.

Help vs judgment – Creating a safe environment

Cataldi says that the greatest gifts a peer, he says, "One big factor is genetic predisposition. If your family members have struggled with addiction, it's possible that you will too. Another is development. If someone started using substances at a young age, they're more likely to become addicted later on in life. Environment too – if someone is surrounded by people who use or experience a traumatic experience that can increase their risk of becoming addicted.

"Mental health issues can also play a role. Many people struggle with addiction to themselves when someone is struggling with addiction there is an underlying mental health condition that has been untreated, some of the most common include depression, anxiety, and PTSD. We call this co-occurring disorders. If someone wants to get treatment for addiction, it's important to look for a place that does dual diagnosis that can root out only their addiction, but the underlying mental health condition that contributes to it.

Our good friends at the SEDA encourage those dealing with an addicted person to consider environment as well: "That old saying 'nature or nurture' might be better phrased 'nature and nurture' because research shows that a person's health is the result of dynamic interaction between genetics and environment."

The report, entitled Genetics and Epigenetics of Addiction, continues: "For example, a community that provides healthy after-school activities has been shown to reduce vulnerability to drug addiction, and data show that access to exercise can discourage drug-seeking behaviour, an effect that is more pronounced in males than in females.

"Exposure to drugs or stress in a person's social or cultural environment can also both gene expression and behavioral responses to drugs, which may increase or decrease risk for addiction. Research also suggests that genes can play a part in how a person responds to his or her environment, placing some people at higher risk for disease than others."

Should you fire someone who's addicted?

Dr. O explains that while habitual use can still cause problems, the difference between habit and dependence is the amount of choice involved.

She shares her expertise in delineating between the two: "With addiction, individuals have a more challenging time with their choices because of the dependence and control the addiction has over their life. When something is habitual, it's done by rote, it's done because it's what we do, it's what we're around from. With addiction, you have to ask the trouble and harm their addiction is causing and may try to make an effort to stop. Still, due to their dependence on the substance, they will quickly fall back into the same patterns and behaviours they had before."

Help vs judgment – Creating a safe environment

Cataldi says that the greatest gifts a peer, he says, "One big factor is genetic predisposition. If your family members have struggled with addiction, it's possible that you will too. Another is development. If someone started using substances at a young age, they're more likely to become addicted later on in life. Environment too – if someone is surrounded by people who use or experience a traumatic experience that can increase their risk of becoming addicted.

"Mental health issues can also play a role. Many people struggle with addiction to themselves when someone is struggling with addiction there is an underlying mental health condition that has been untreated, some of the most common include depression, anxiety, and PTSD. We call this co-occurring disorders. If someone wants to get treatment for addiction, it's important to look for a place that does dual diagnosis that can root out only their addiction, but the underlying mental health condition that contributes to it.

Our good friends at the SEDA encourage those dealing with an addicted person to consider environment as well: "That old saying 'nature or nurture' might be better phrased 'nature and nurture' because research shows that a person's health is the result of dynamic interaction between genetics and environment."

The report, entitled Genetics and Epigenetics of Addiction, continues: "For example, a community that provides healthy after-school activities has been shown to reduce vulnerability to drug addiction, and data show that access to exercise can discourage drug-seeking behaviour, an effect that is more pronounced in males than in females.

"Exposure to drugs or stress in a person's social or cultural environment can also both gene expression and behavioral responses to drugs, which may increase or decrease risk for addiction. Research also suggests that genes can play a part in how a person responds to his or her environment, placing some people at higher risk for disease than others."

Should you fire someone who's addicted?

Dr. O explains that while habitual use can still cause problems, the difference between habit and dependence is the amount of choice involved.

She shares her expertise in delineating between the two: "With addiction, individuals have a more challenging time with their choices because of the dependence and control the addiction has over their life. When something is habitual, it's done by rote, it's done because it's what we do, it's what we're around from. With addiction, you have to ask the trouble and harm their addiction is causing and may try to make an effort to stop. Still, due to their dependence on the substance, they will quickly fall back into the same patterns and behaviours they had before."

Help vs judgment – Creating a safe environment

Cataldi says that the greatest gifts a peer, he says, "One big factor is genetic predisposition. If your family members have struggled with addiction, it's possible that you will too. Another is development. If someone started using substances at a young age, they're more likely to become addicted later on in life. Environment too – if someone is surrounded by people who use or experience a traumatic experience that can increase their risk of becoming addicted.

"Mental health issues can also play a role. Many people struggle with addiction to themselves when someone is struggling with addiction there is an underlying mental health condition that has been untreated, some of the most common include depression, anxiety, and PTSD. We call this co-occurring disorders. If someone wants to get treatment for addiction, it's important to look for a place that does dual diagnosis that can root out only their addiction, but the underlying mental health condition that contributes to it.

Our good friends at the SEDA encourage those dealing with an addicted person to consider environment as well: "That old saying 'nature or nurture' might be better phrased 'nature and nurture' because research shows that a person's health is the result of dynamic interaction between genetics and environment."

The report, entitled Genetics and Epigenetics of Addiction, continues: "For example, a community that provides healthy after-school activities has been shown to reduce vulnerability to drug addiction, and data show that access to exercise can discourage drug-seeking behaviour, an effect that is more pronounced in males than in females.

"Exposure to drugs or stress in a person's social or cultural environment can also both gene expression and behavioral responses to drugs, which may increase or decrease risk for addiction. Research also suggests that genes can play a part in how a person responds to his or her environment, placing some people at higher risk for disease than others."

Catalli agrees, saying, "Habitual drinkers may even actively reliant on the substance, whereas addicts may know it's not good for them but can't do without it. One of the signs that distinguishes the two is behaviour. If your barkeeper doesn't recognise you, you're probably a habitual drinker. If your barkeeper is regularly inspected, you're probably addicted. If you want to stop, pay attention to whether or not you have withdrawal symptoms when you don't have the substance in your system. Addicts will find it hard to do so, addiction and not habitual use. Another difference is if you're habitual you can easily stop using, but if you're addicted you are unable to stop using or are often unsuccessful when you try."

It is important to make sure here that because of the stigma attached to addiction, people don't feel that they are being forced into making a particular choice. The way in Ballybrack and surrounding areas of something that we personally find distasteful, but in the workplace even more than in our personal lives, it's not our place to judge, we don't know what is hard-right for affecting a person's well-being, or what is hard-wrong for their well-being, and it's simply need support, but do so sensitively and without judgement.

How do you spot the signs?

Substance addiction can come out in the workplace by product of other issues such as bereavement,grief, mental health issues or even being the victim of domestic abuse, situations it can be hard to know what's going on because of our experts shared the same opinion on approaching this at work, which I'll paraphrase here, "Addiction is a disease, and it's important to avoid stigmatizing such or being mentally 'almost' it can be easy to chalk up to there not caring or [illegible] positive! – but in reality, our first thinking should be to think, 'Something is obviously not working is wrong, and I should ask if they need support and if everything is ok?'"

Signs of addiction are when individuals start to have problems within their relationships (with a spouse, at work, friends, or family), when their work or school is impacted, trouble sleeping, erratic and uncontrollable behaviour (mood swings, irritability, aggressive behaviour), neglecting responsibilities, or hygiene, irresponsibility and neglect of one's duties and responsibilities. Or it shows on how to spot the signs.

Dr Anna Ward, a GP who specialises in treating mental health, has put this handy bulleted list together specifically for HR Grapevine readers.

Here to spot the signs of addiction:

- **Drowsiness**
- **Slurred speech**
- **Lack of coordination**
- **Irritability or changes in mood**
- **Problems concentrating or thinking clearly**
- **Memory problems**
- **Involuntary eye movements**
- **Lack of inhibition**
- **Change in behaviour**
- **Poor job performance**
- **Bad relationships**
- **Greater levels of absence through short-term sickness**
- **Worsening relationships with management, colleagues or customers**
- **Dishonesty and theft**
- **Hospital or erratic behaviour**
- **Lowered ability to successfully carry out everyday tasks**

While it's important to not overreport or jut too much pressure on yourself as a manager, it's important to be aware of the signs of addiction, the more you know, the more you have an open, honest environment of trust, and the more you know your people, the better you'll be able to tell when trouble is afoot.

Is going 'cold turkey' bad for you?

Stopping drinking suddenly can be very dangerous, and can even lead to hallucinations, seizures and alcohol, according to the NHS and several charities for addiction.

If, after a period of drinking, you experience any of the following symptoms, you require dependent on alcohol and you should NOT suddenly stop drinking completely:

- **Seizures (fits)**
- **Hand tremors ('the shakes')**
- **Sweating**
- **Seeing things that are not actually real (visual hallucinations)**
- **Depression**
- **Anxiety**
- **Difficulty sleeping (insomnia)**

Similarly, if you are addicted to drugs, the same issues may apply. It's best to quit under the guidance of a medical professional.

How to approach addiction

With that in mind, the first note of impact is to reveal ourselves that we are not responsible for someone else's actions, but we are responsible for our own actions. As Dr Anna Ward, "Most people are ready and equipped to cope, they will, in fact manages, it's vital that we set our doors into any sort of co-dependency and keep appropriate work boundaries in place.

The pattern of support + gaining + indulging again + feeling ashamed (known as the 'shame spiral' in therapeutic terms) is one that's easy to be drawn into. It's so important to create boundaries and, as Dr Anna Ward, "Ensure that you don't fall into the trap of being the person who is always helping, having heavier conversations, supporting when you are, signposting and then most likely stepping back.

But one human echoes this instruction, saying, "It is important that line managers do not feel pressured into thinking that they are solely responsible for the employee's well-being. Line managers are not counsellors, and should not be expected to provide counselling, support and coaching on the best way to deal with situations. GPs can be a good place for line managers to call for coaching support."

The conclusion: "HR and line managers need to be trained on where to signpost the employee for support but to also be able to recognise when substance abuse is taking place in the workplace. Line managers need to be aware of the signs of substance abuse and how to approach the situation. Co-workers are frequently impacted and HR and management will also need to support the broader team, while maintaining the confidentiality of the employee suffering from addiction."

Hartley-Allen counsels not just patients facing addiction, but their employers and loved ones, and has great advice for keeping those boundaries intact, and looking after ourselves while being supportive:

"It's important after a disclosure to keep in mind that you're not a therapist or someone who is responsible for the individual being healed from their addiction," he explains. "It's crucial to understand that your responsibilities are to yourself, the employee and the company. Don't keep it quiet if you're concerned, but don't be the person who tries to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders. Instead, point someone in talk, saying, "It's not my area of expertise, but there is this or a colleague or friend?". If you are an employee, are there pathways of support?" If they're a colleague, can you encourage them to engage into those pathways?"

As VP of Clinical Operations at Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, Dr. Peter Vinnicky is a literal expert on dependence issues, including how to speak about them with the affected person.

"If you think or know that someone has a problem with drugs or alcohol, it is important to approach them with empathy and listen to what they have to say," he shares. "Although it is common in movies to see a dramatic intervention where someone is confronted by many people, this is not the best approach. When people are confronted, they tend to respond by withdrawing further and becoming defensive. It is important to be direct, but also compassionate and supportive.

63% of adults being treated for substance addiction reported mental health problems

16.9% rise in gambling addiction treatments in 2022

"Tell them specifically what you have noticed using "I" statements (e.g., "I have seen you get upset more often" instead of "you get upset all the time"), and explain how this behavior affects you and your family." Strong statements. "Try to put a time to talk when you are both calm and able to have what may be a difficult conversation," he shares. "Let the person know that you care about them and that you are trustworthy and reliable. If you or someone else in your life has struggled with substance use in the past, you can share this with them if you are comfortable doing it."

And the ultimate guidance is something "Just make sure that the message is about hope, not about you telling them that they have to do the same thing you or someone you know did in order to get better."

Dr Patel offers her wisdom: "The foreseen consideration is to approach this with dignity, sensitivity and empathy, ensuring the individual feels supported and understood. The initial approach should support as they would if they had any other medical or psychological condition. I would encourage HR professionals and managers to inspire colleagues to get work support from their GP or occupational health provider, ensuring they feel supported in their decision. The process of removing someone time off to get expert help, so often the cost of recruiting and training a new employee may be more than the cost of time off."

Jessie Cole's passion is to see people move on from their past and to have equality of opportunity. As a Lived Experience Speaker, Jessie shares her experiences of addiction, and how she was pushed back to work, but was very lucky she with people who noticed a second chance + heavily incarcerated workers, those with mental illnesses seven enough to interfere with their career and of course, those with dependence issues.

Sharing her expertise, she says, "Start gently. At CODE, we tend to offer people who approach us for help a 'Lived Experience' mentor who has been through addiction themselves and has overcome it. Meet first get completely clean. This gives people a sense of purpose and a full-time paid role to work towards when they're ready. This also applies if someone relapses. When that happens, we refer them to rehab and expert support and have the door firmly open for when they are ready to come back.

Cole continues, "If your employee is dealing with addiction, make accessing support easy for them. Don't make them feel ashamed for the person's support groups, encourage them to plan how they will spend their first pay cheque offer to drive them home if their with home goes just the pub or encourage them to do a 12-step or mindfulness drug-free online programme offers (where applicable).

Finally, Cole says that employers must remember that, ultimately, the responsibility for managing the addiction is down to the person who lives with it.

"It is not your role as an employer to make sure they stay clean – your role is to support them every step of the way," she shares. "Be firm, but be fair, and be ready to listen and learn."

One of the things to keep in mind if your employee is facing substance abuse, rather than addiction to gambling, sex, etc, is that the UK government has reported that opioid abuse was the foremost reason that working age adults in the UK entered rehab, comprising 50% of those in rehab in 2021 (Data from 2022 is not yet available).

With opioid abuse, mood swings are very common, and stress factors can enhance that.

Jones says that in the case of this addiction, "the best course of action is to focus on reducing stress factors in the workplace and encourage the employee to seek help from a GP or rehab centre. In addition, we can reduce the likelihood that they feel triggered to engage with their addiction behaviour. Calm can be introduced by taking more frequent micro breaks, introducing mindfulness into the workplace, and letting staff know that advice and support is there for them."

Should you fire someone who's addicted?

There are a lot of important questions on this one, but the short answer is not necessarily. The longer answer begins first asking more questions. If addiction is a disease, should we not treat it as one? Should we treat it as disability and so, it is covered by the Equality Act 2010?

The answer to the latter question is no, but there are certainly caveats, particularly the type of discrimination covered in the Act known as 'victimisation'.

According to a whitepaper produced by law firm Fletcher Day, since addiction is not considered a disability under the Act, "Employers are permitted to treat individuals less favourably directly because they suffer from addiction, without risking discrimination claims. However, treating an individual is treating or overcoming the barriers to functions of their addiction to help them do their job."

Of course, whether something is legal and ethical are two different considerations, and with employee health, including emotional intelligence, becoming more and more in the fore, firing an employee who's addicted should be the absolute last port of call.

The Fletcher Day whitepaper continues: "While addiction is not a disability in and of itself, it is often through not always connected or exacerbated by other physical or mental health issues which may qualify as disabilities under the Act. In fact, the Equality Act covers a wide range of physical and mental ailments – this can be particularly pertinent to individuals with chronic physical conditions, as their mental health may be affected and they may turn to alcohol or substances as a temporary fix.

"In such cases, the addiction could be treated as a side effect of the physical disability and therefore, if the employee is discriminated against, the fact that it was all that side effect amount to discrimination arising from disability. This can be particularly tricky to deal with if the employee has a 'hidden' or 'invisible' disability or condition.

The paper continues: "Alternatively, the addiction may have caused a disability in itself, for instance, if the addiction has caused liver damage, very number of severe liver conditions, nicotine addiction may cause lung conditions, and addictions generally can cause depressive illnesses, which may be a disability in itself. Alternatively, the addiction or the condition can in principle be 'self-inflicted' as the result of addiction and be covered by the Act."

Annual cost of addiction to UK government:

£21.5B for drugs £10.7B for alcohol

As a evident from the above, addiction is rarely (though it can be) found in isolation, and is often connected with other issues. For example, children living in homes where there is a substantial abuse or neglect exhibit the same depth tendencies of adult substance abuse.

According to a blog post by the US National Library of Medicine on the link between child abuse and adult substance addiction, "Several epidemiological studies have shown that experiencing abuse as a child increases the risk for substance use later in life. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have been a focus and alerted as a coping mechanism for dealing with high-risk behaviors and trauma. Results from a long-term study following abused children up to the age of 32 years showed that childhood abuse was a strong risk factor for the person's subsequent substance use later in life.

In addition, adult victims of domestic abuse also have a higher frequency of abusive relationships to substances or have other mental health issues such as eating disorders. And obviously, mental health issues such as anxiety and depression are also a common consequence of abuse. Adult victims of abuse are 4x's nearly having heavier conversations with their employers or engaging the root cause.

"Think about whether drug and alcohol misuse in your workplace is treated as a disciplinary matter or a health concern," cautions Dr. Patel. "If you treat addiction as a health issue, you can provide appropriate support to them, an employment referral may find that you're actually dealing with a disability. But, if their mental work is safety critical you may need to temporarily move them to another job."

Hartley reminds us that the people function has responsibility to keep our employees safe and healthy. "Our duty of care to our employees and our duty of care to our customers and clients mean we need to be passed on to the appropriate answers. It's important to remember that as much as we want to help people, we can't do everything and care about them the way family members may unfortunately.

"Sometimes a person may express information which may suggest either they or someone they know or a member of the public are at risk. For example, a person may talk about how they were looking after their child the other day and they left them in the bathroom while they went to the shop, or they may be driving a substance dulls but, they operate machinery or drive a car while they are drunk (individual and public at risk)"

Carrying on from Hartley's comment above, it makes sense to have a mind safeguarding and reporting, which, while not necessarily 100% specific or legal requirements, it's a good practice to have in place and to be aware of if being a member of a society that is a hub to help with mental health.

Don't promise anyone that you will keep anything they have told you a secret, as this would make you complicit and potentially put you and others at risk. If you feel that anyone is at risk, instead, you could:

1. **Share this information with a manager or team leader**
2. **Share this information with appropriate services such as the police, ambulance, or child services**
3. **If it is within your power, take immediate action to protect the individual and members of the public, e.g., placing them on paid leave until further investigation.**

Improvement plans for addicts

Supervisors and HR traditionally have dealt with these issues through Performance Improvement Plans, up to and including termination of employment. But, as we've been discussing, this is not the best way to deal with addiction. Employers are recognizing that if they can help prevent a work-life balance including wellbeing strategies, they can more than stop the suffer of harsher consequences for employees and their loved ones. It's found that healthy employees can lead to the health of an employer.

With new generations in the workforce and companies have a method to retain employees and attract new ones with a holistic wellbeing strategy.

In developing a holistic wellbeing strategy, there are a number of steps the most important being communication. When an employee is perceived as being in a difficult situation, it's important to have a conversation with them in a confidential setting. We know through our experience, it is not always the quality of what is happening, and we cannot assume that what we see is all that is there.

Supervisors need to be prepared for a empathic communication to understand what is actually happening in the employee life. Consultation should be given to an employee assistance plan (EAP) in conjunction with Performance Improvement Plans to set an employee up for success in both recovery and performance expectancy.

The EAP should have a visible hub to with the employee and the supervisor population, with a representative visiting the workplace. The EAP should conduct a wellness audit, and provide a report to the employer with recommendations. The EAP can be effectively communicated with employees, EAP reading materials and EAP Increasing employee awareness of the benefits and availability of the programs offered.

Training for supervisors should cover how to communicate with sensitivity and empathy to employees and get still include in the conversation the need to maintain the requirement for productive performance.

An agenda for the employee meetings would include techniques for stress management, including sustained breathing, mindfulness, and the importance of prioritizing Government training. Well designed EAPs give the financial wellness education, grief support, substance abuse counseling. The EAP should become a quality tool.

Help vs judgement – Creating a safe environment

Hartley's advice on how to create a workplace that is centred on trust and safety.

"It's important that if a person discloses addiction to us, that we make sure we're open-minded and take a receptive manner, not a shaming one. Taking a receptive stance means that we try suspend our judgement and listen to what the individual is saying without making judgements.

"Perhaps," he said, "we could acknowledge how difficult it must have been to risk sharing the information with you. Try not to make the conversation about yourself and all the things that worked for you when times were hard. These things can be useful, but only in small doses. Try to acknowledge their feelings 'That sounds really tough' or 'I'm sorry to hear you're having a difficult time right now.'

People with addictions commonly suffer from loneliness and poor support networks. You might want to ask them:

1. **Have you spoken to anyone else about this?**
2. **Have you reached out to support from a therapist?**
3. **Have you spoken with your GP?**

Depending on the answers to Hartley's example questions and what services you are able to provide (such as access to an EAP programme), it might be the opportunity to suggest taking it to HR and/or their line manager, as there may be things your business can provide, such as changing workload or structure to reduce stress, as stress increases the likelihood of addictive behaviour, offering therapy if it is provided under a health package, or taking time off work.

In many businesses, lunches and dinners are often social events that are part of work which can involve alcohol and even drugs. If a person is reaching out for support, it may be advantageous to give them permission to take a step back from the environments they feel most likely to engage in addictive behaviours. The idea with this, however, is that they feel supported, not ashamed and that it's encouraged they take time for their wellbeing because that's what's important.

Roe Dos Santos shares that, "open communication is key to ensuring the employee is aware of the support available through their line manager, HR, mental health first aiders, the EAP family and friends. Where appropriate, workplace or role adjustments might be made either short or long-term.

"Home working has increased employee isolation and the CIPD reported that 27% of people say their alcohol consumption has increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Employers need to review their company culture and ensure it extends to home workers," she concludes.

Treatment Leave

Allowing employees time away from work for medical appointments and treatment is important. There can be cases where the employee is not medically fit to attend work but maintaining a line of communication can prevent the employee from feeling isolated and will make their return to work a lot easier. Engaging advice from Occupational Health Physicians can enable adjustments to the employee's role and can help manage a graded return to work. For the more extreme cases, an employee may be off work for a longer period of time which can cause huge financial worries. Employees should be made aware of income protection and private medical benefits which can provide longer-term financial security as well as access to quicker treatment that might otherwise have longer waiting times through the NHS.

It's important for employers to promote a company culture of employee wellbeing and have a drug and alcohol policy to refer to with support frameworks and access to treatment pathways. ACAS and the CIPD can provide guidance on creating policies that will help prevent cases from reaching formal disciplinary or dismissal. Referring employees to external professional help is imperative for getting the appropriate addiction support.

- Victoria Roe Dos Santos

Signposting and help

Ultimately, it's of utmost importance to remember, as mentioned above, that habitual use, or even abuse, are different from addiction – even if the addiction is to things that contravene our personal morals.

And of course, we must be mindful that some people are "functioning addicts" – meaning that they haven't yet or may never choose to treat their addiction. That doesn't make them less worthy as people or less valued as colleagues. Unless the behaviour is impacting their work, it may not be HR's place to speak up.

But for those instances where it's welcome, then HR and management needs to be able to signpost for help. For milder cases, you may want to signpost to the Employee Assistance Programme. Where it's more severe, it's best to share specific help, including medical treatment.

Since employee cases vary, different types of support are needed for different employees. The presence of trained Mental Health First Aiders in the workplace can provide confidential points of contact that can signpost employees to the right support.

Here are some helpful links:

General support

The Samaritans are a great place to start if you just need a friendly voice and aren't sure where to start:

Samaritans

Drug addiction

The NHS, as ever, is an amazing resource and this page provides advice and helpful links for drug addiction:

NHS Addiction Support

Action Addiction

Action Addiction works to de-stigmatise addiction in the UK, with several charities working together under their umbrella. The website offers a great chat function:

Action Addiction

Alcohol addiction

Drink Aware offers a chat function, email and phone support and specific help for those who want specific ethnic or faith-based help:

Drink Aware

Turning Point

Turning Point is for people with learning disabilities, mental health issues and addiction, and offers tailor support:

Turning Point

Gambling addiction

Gamcare is run by those who understand an addiction to gambling and the damage risk-prone behaviour can cause. The site offers phone help, or chat via their website, WhatsApp, FB messenger and even has a forum for people to discuss recovery.

Gamcare

Sex Addiction

Turning Point is for people with learning disabilities, mental health issues and addiction, and offers tailor support:

ATSAC

Help for families and friends

AdFam exists solely to help the loved ones and carers of those with dependence issues on a variety of habits and substances:

Adfam

Shopping addiction

UK Rehab offers a dedicated service for those addicted to shopping or spending money in general. If the latter is your issue, your bank is the best first port of call, as most major UK banks now offer financial counselling for free. UK Rehab offers educational services and a callback service for addicts:

UK Rehab

Help for children

While the Child Protection Services are the best place to start if you're worried for a child's immediate safety, Action on Addiction helps both minor and adult children of addicts find their way to healing:

Action Addiction

LGBTQ services

Queer people face issues that a lot of people don't face, such as ostracization, and treatment of unhealthy behaviours may need to be sensitive to these issues. The LGBT Foundation is a great place to start:

LGBT Foundation

LGBTQ services

And this is a comprehensive guide for LGBT sufferers or those who want to help them:

Addiction Center

alcohol | drugs | Workplace wellbeing | Addiction | Employee experience | mental wellbeing | Physical Wellbeing

BEEBOT AI
Conversational AI is reinventing the Employee Experience
Download

Found this useful? You might also like

Breaking point | Are we in a full mental health recession?

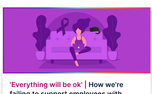
The world had still not recovered from the 2009 Great Recession when COVID-19 hit. We faced another global recession that lasted for nearly a year. And...

myGrapevine | 3 days ago | 6 mins read

Panic | A huge amount of Americans are upskilling, in fear of layoffs

The a huge amount of American workers are currently in the process of focussing their efforts on upskilling themselves, to improve their chances of being...

FEATURE | 3 days ago | 2 mins read



'Everything will be ok' | How we're failing to support employees with cancer

Everyone dreads that moment: the instance that kicked off the TV series Breaking Bad, the second that everything changes and you realise your own body...

myGrapevine | 6 days ago | 10 mins read

© 1979–2023 Executive Grapevine International Ltd