

Solutions Digest

Mental Health and Substance Abuse Issues That Affect the Workplace

April – 2009

Effective Substance Intervention in the Workplace

Substance Abuse Problem Prevalence in the Workplace – Since the inception of workplace EAPs in the 1940s, workplace health has been by far the most adversely affected by misuse of alcohol and/or substance abuse. Current estimated costs to businesses based on alcohol use alone tops \$500 million annually.

Developing Workplace Prevention Strategies – Recognizing substance abuse problems in the workplace is only the beginning. Effective EAPs and employers should also:

- **Offer wellness education** (e.g., newsletters, educational presentations on differences between use, misuse and abuse of substances, etc.) to help employees learn about the disease of addiction.
- **Reduce stigma.** Build wellness programs that include stigma-free support for employees struggling to address substance use. Offer lunch-time or after-hours support groups (AA, or Alanon for example) to strengthen long-term commitment to recovery. Stigma is reduced by open discussion of issues and by treating each person with dignity and respect.
- **Integrate substance abuse prevention messages** into basic health promotion topics (proven to be more effective than presenting substance abuse as a stand-alone topic).
- **Be culturally competent** by making sure programs are culturally and linguistically appropriate with audience gender, culture and age. Certain subjects are regarded very differently by different cultures, genders and age groups. EAPs that are aware of these differences are much more likely to build programs that impact employees.
- **Seek effective treatment programs outside** the workplace for employee referral if necessary.
- **Accept and promote understanding of addiction as a chronic disease**—much like diabetes. It is not “cured” in a few weeks, but rather is a condition needing steady and continuous attention and self care. “Successful treatment” is sustained when met with an attitude of support and acceptance, backed by firm policies that clearly state consequences of failure to address substance use problems.

Confrontational Approach – Historically, treatment for substance abuse involved confrontation, argument, advice, labeling and/or a punitive approach. This was not very effective.



Motivational Interviewing (MI) – Introduced in 1983 by psychologist William Miller, motivational interviewing has

become arguably the most powerful tool for treatment of substance abuse, as well as for any type of behavioral change. Miller describes MI as “a directive, client-centered counseling style for eliciting behavior change by helping people explore and resolve ambivalence.”

Change is accomplished in non-judgmental fashion by helping an individual build motivation to change from within. Key to this approach is respecting the person’s autonomy and freedom of choice/consequences regarding his/her own behavior. Guiding thoughtful examination of ambivalence is far more likely to build a desire for change. This introduces a more collaborative approach by:

- Listening and restating what you hear.
- Expressing acceptance and affirmation.
- Reinforcing the individual’s own problem recognition, concerns, desires, and ability to change.
- Carefully monitoring the person’s readiness to change and building motivations to do so.
- Affirming the person’s freedom of choice and self-direction.

While MI places the focus on helping each individual recognize negative behavior and cultivate a desire for change, it is also supported by clearly-stated employer policies outlining consequences should problem behaviors remain unaddressed (e.g., probation, sanctions, job loss, etc.). A matter-of-fact delivery of such information eliminates offense and conveys respect while emphasizing exactly what the organization is/is not prepared to accept in future behavior. EAPs will not only increase treatment success, but build employee productivity and loyalty.

This quarterly newsletter is designed to give you brief and useful information about mental health and addiction issues in the workplace. If you have questions regarding strategies for mental health issues in the workplace, or newsletter content, questions, or suggestions, contact:

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