



Opioids—either prescription medications or an illicit drug—present one of the most serious drug crises the U.S. has ever experienced.  
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# Supervisor Newsletter

## Preventing Substance Abuse

America's drug problem remains a major concern for most Americans. According to the Pew Research Center, a large majority says that drug abuse across the country is either a serious problem (55%) or at crisis levels (32%). Drug addiction is a growing problem in the country and in the workplace. Drug abuse costs U.S. businesses billions of dollars annually. Every effort must be made to reduce substance abuse.

Drug free workplace programs that focus on prevention can be a large part of the solution to the problem. While there are treatment programs available for employees who are addicted to drugs, a much more effective way to deal with the disease of addiction is to stop it before it starts.

## Workplace Stress and Substance Abuse

Reducing work-related stress is an important first step in reducing substance abuse and preventing addiction and alcoholism. Stress has been proven to be a precursor to substance abuse and addiction. It is the number one environmental substance abuse risk issue. Recent research supports a relation of work-related stressors to elevated alcohol consumption and problem drinking.

On average, 20 million Americans are dealing with anxiety and stress daily, much of it work related. Stress has been a well-known risk factor in the development of addiction/alcoholism and in addiction relapse vulnerability for many years, and is one of the most powerful triggers for relapse, even after long periods in recovery.

The last decade has led to a dramatic increase in understanding the underlying mechanisms for the association between stress and addiction. Behavioral and neurobiological correlates are being recognized, and some evidence of molecular and cellular changes associated with chronic stress and addiction has been identified. According to a nationwide poll by the American Psychological Association, three-quarters of Americans list work as a significant source of stress, with over half of those surveyed indicating that their work productivity suffered due to stress.

## Job-Related Stress

Many safety-sensitive jobs are environments of stress and anxiety. Police, firefighters, military, first responders, and emergency room personnel are just a few examples. Other jobs are made unnecessarily stressful by high-pressure supervisors or unreasonable work expectations. Three out of four employees report that their boss is the most stressful part of their job. Whatever the cause, when stress becomes a daily regimen, the likelihood that employees will look for an escape through substance abuse increases exponentially. The answer to high-stress work environments, however, is not to use substances to mask the situation. The appropriate response is to learn healthy ways of managing stress.

At work, people experience stress in a number of ways. Over the past few years, employers have ranked the top three causes of workplace stress as lack of work-life balance (86%), inadequate staffing (70%), and technologies that expand employee availability during nonworking hours (63%). For some, the majority of work-related stress is due to interpersonal conflict. When an employee does not get along with his/her supervisor or coworkers, the stress level is increased for everyone involved.

Many employees become stressed out and frustrated if forced to work more hours than they had to in the past, or when their performance goes unrecognized. Technology such as smartphones often increases the stress level at work by creating the expectation that employees are available to clients or coworkers even when not officially on the clock. These job-related stressors can become chronic, leaving employees in a near-constant state of tension and worry and too often seeking a release through chemical intoxication, especially for those prone to addiction. Addicted individuals show enhanced sensitivity to drug craving and greater anxiety in stress and drug-related situations.

## Stress and Substance Abuse Consequences

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work reports that more than half of the 550 million working days lost annually in the U.S. from absenteeism are stress-related. According to the American Institute of Stress; job

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stress and the resulting substance abuse cost U.S. businesses more than \$300 billion annually due to increased absenteeism, employee turnover, diminished productivity, and medical expenses. Given these statistics, it is important for businesses to protect their employees from excess stress in order to reduce substance abuse and positively impact the bottom line.

### **Proactively Managing Work-Related Stress**

The good news is that there are many things businesses can do to help employees manage stress and prevent drug and alcohol abuse at work. The first step is for employers and supervisors to recognize what stress can do to an employee, both physically and emotionally.

Although stress affects everyone differently, stress is known to cause serious mental, physical, and emotional health problems. In addition to substance abuse, high stress can result in depression, anxiety, and compulsive behaviors. It can also lead to headaches, fatigue, insomnia, stomach disorders, and hypertension (high blood pressure). When work-related stress follows a person home, the temptation is great to use alcohol or drugs in order to "get away" or quiet the anxiety.

### **Organizational and Individual Change**

A combination of organizational change and stress management is often the most useful approach for preventing stress at work. Companies need to understand their employees' stress drivers, assess their health and productivity programs in light of the findings, and leverage what employees are already doing to cope with stress. Both organizations and employees can utilize strategies at organizational and individual levels. Generally, organizational-level strategies include job procedure modification and employee assistance programs (EAPs). Individual-level strategies include taking vacations and exercising regularly. Getting a realistic job preview to understand the normal workload and schedules of the job will also help applicants to identify whether the job fits them.

Companies should implement and maintain drug free workplace programs, improve and

promote EAPs, encourage employees to take vacations, design company-sponsored physical activities, and offer formal programs to effectively manage stress.

In addition, organizations need to take a closer look at employee compensation, ensure adequate staffing levels, clear up any conflicting job expectations, and improve the overall organizational culture. Some companies provide access to financial planning information/services and offer flexible working options to help employees manage stress.

### **Lead by Example**

One of the best approaches to reducing job stress is for supervisors to lead by example. Supervisors should encourage employees to engage in stress relief activities, such as walking, healthy eating, stretching, and exercising. Eating right, getting enough sleep, drinking plenty of water, and engaging in regular physical activity are all critical to keeping stress levels down. Sticking to a regular exercise program of brisk walking can boost a person's immune system. Even low levels of aerobic exercise, such as 30 minutes of brisk walking 5 days a week, can be effective.

Some companies recommend that employees download stretch break reminders on their computer. These reminders appear throughout the day and provide employees with a different stretch each time, reminding them of the importance of stepping away from their desks for a few moments throughout the day. An important factor in reducing stress and substance abuse on the job is to make moderate exercise part of a regular routine. Employees should also be encouraged to ask for professional support when needed to help reduce their stress.

There is a strong recognition that the workplace experience can both contribute to and reduce employee stress and substance abuse. By pursuing a holistic approach that covers both health and wellness programs along with drug free workplace programs, organizations and supervisors can foster a safe, healthy, and productive work environment.

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