

Addressing Substance Use Concerns in a Remote Work Environment



Remote work has made it easier for employees to hide their drug and alcohol use. A recent study of American adults showed that the psychological distress, as well as extended social isolation related to the pandemic, is strongly associated with alcohol use-quantity and frequency-as well as heavy drinking.

The Pandemic Has Taken a Toll The pandemic has created a “perfect storm” of factors that increase drug and alcohol use and abuse. Findings across several studies include:

- 33% report more alcohol or substance use than usual
- People with anxiety are 41% more likely to increase their alcohol intake (The number of adults reporting symptoms of anxiety and/or depression from pre-pandemic to today, has gone from 11% to 41%)
- More than 1 in 4 remote workers report working impaired by alcohol, drugs or both – a rate that is 3.7 times more likely in remote workers than non-remote workers, and 3.5x higher in men than women

As a Manager/Leader, How Will I know? The signs of substance abuse could be harder to spot in employees working remotely. Using webcam meeting and paying attention to work habits can make it easier to spot troublesome behavior:

- A change in job performance (increase or decrease) or Inconsistent work quality
- Carelessness, mistakes or errors in judgment
- Working longer hours or Increased absenteeism or on the job “presenteeism”
- Decreased availability/responsiveness (extended lunch periods/early departures)
- Impulsive body modifications (hair color/style, tattoos, piercings)
- Deterioration in personal appearance or personal hygiene or change in speech patterns
- Physical movements (fidgeting, twitching)
- Complaints, excuses, and time off for vaguely defined illnesses or family problems
- Increased irritability or lack of caring

What Can I do? Substance abuse is a devastating and deeply personal problem that can be difficult to navigate in a professional setting, but employers can act with compassion by paying attention to their employees, keeping an open dialogue around alcohol and drug abuse, and creating a work climate that encourages honesty and transparency.

- Be open, upfront and proactive about expectations
- Talk to your employees about drug and alcohol abuse and policies early
- Do not approach employees about suspected substance abuse. Keep your conversation focused on job performance, established rules and work expectations
- Remind all employees about the resources and support available through Best Care EAP on a regular basis. Resources are only worthwhile if employees know about them and use them.

Best Care EAP Can Help Having discussions around mental health and substance use are not easy to have. Whether you are looking for specific resources in your area or want to connect with a Best Care consultant or counselor to prepare for a difficult conversation, we can help. Call **800.801.4182** or email eap@bestcareeap.org to support your own wellbeing and the wellbeing of your employees.