



Supporting employees with addiction

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Workplace Academy





Introduction

Addiction is when we don't have control over doing, taking, or using something. Addiction often involves a substance like alcohol, nicotine, or drugs. But it's possible to become addicted to things like gambling or gaming.

Addiction is not only harmful to the person experiencing it, but also other people around them.

In this guide, we discuss different types of addiction, and how managers can support employees who may be struggling with addiction.

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How addiction starts

Addictions usually start out as an enjoyable habit - like smoking or drinking with friends, a gamble at the races, or taking drugs to relax.

But if you're no longer in control of your habit, or it's harmful, then it becomes an addiction.

Drugs, alcohol, and nicotine affect the way you feel. They can make you feel relaxed and less self-conscious. This can give you the urge to use or take the substance again to try and recreate these feelings.

Taking certain drugs and gambling can create mental 'highs', which are usually followed by a strong urge to do it again. Once a habit develops, it can be very hard to stop. You may find you need more of something to get the same effect, whether that's gambling, alcohol, drugs, or nicotine.

If you're addicted to something, you often lose the ability to choose whether to stop or continue the behaviour. You may crave it, and not having it can cause withdrawal symptoms. These symptoms can be unpleasant, so you may think it's easier to continue the behaviour. It then becomes hard to break this cycle.

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Alcohol addiction

Alcohol is highly addictive and can cause many physical and mental health problems, as well as affecting your relationships, finances, and work.

In England, more than 25 million adults regularly drink alcohol.

It's thought that alcohol use costs the UK economy £7 billion each year due to lost productivity. But it's not only workplaces that suffer from the effects of alcohol – stress caused by work can make people drink more.

If you're dependent on alcohol, you'll crave it and can have a high tolerance for it. This means you might often have to drink a lot to feel drunk, and might not have a hangover the next day.

You might also continue to drink even when you know it's damaging your health. In the UK, alcohol misuse is the biggest risk factor for death, ill health, and disability in people aged 15 to 49.



310,863
adults were in
contact with drug
and alcohol
treatment services.

Between April 2023
and March 2024.



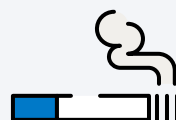
Smoking addiction

Cigarettes contain nicotine, which is extremely addictive. Nicotine triggers receptors (special cells that receive chemical messages) in the brain to release a ‘happy hormone’ called dopamine.

Dopamine helps you to feel good, both physically and mentally. With continuous smoking, the brain starts to expect nicotine to get a dopamine rush.

To make matters harder, the more you smoke, the more nicotine receptors you grow. This means it can take more and more nicotine to give you the dopamine that your mind and body crave.

You may start to get cravings and withdrawal symptoms if you reduce your nicotine intake.



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Drug addiction

Both illegal and prescription drugs can be addictive. Your brain usually rewards healthy behaviours by releasing dopamine.

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This makes you feel pleasure so that you repeat those behaviours. Drugs take over this system by making you want to take more drugs to get a dopamine release.

Regular use of powerful drugs, such as heroin and cocaine, often leads to addiction that can have a serious impact on your health and wellbeing.

Certain prescription medications, such as some painkillers, can also be addictive, and it can become very hard to stop taking them.



Certain prescription medications, like some painkillers, can be addictive.



Gambling addiction

It's estimated that around 1 in every 100 people has a gambling disorder. Gambling can take different forms.

Some people might gamble through the lottery or online casino games. But problems can also start from gambling through investments, trading, and spending money in online games.

Gambling can become an addiction as it can affect the part of our brain that releases dopamine.

You may find that other activities are not as enjoyable, so you gamble more to get that feeling of pleasure from winning. Gambling can result in serious debt and financial problems.



[Alcohol addiction](#)

[Smoking addiction](#)

[Drug addiction](#)

[Gambling](#)

[Other addictions](#)



Other behavioural addictions

Like gambling, there are other addictions that don't involve use of a substance. This includes addiction to the internet, video games, sports, sex, eating disorders, and criminal behaviour.

Some people can even have a work addiction. These types of addictions are often referred to as behavioural addictions.

These types of activities can provide relief from stress or provide pleasure in the way that drugs and alcohol do. And they involve a loss of control and withdrawal symptoms when not engaging in the activity.

Many of these behaviours are common activities, such as using the internet. But they can still be harmful if excessive, especially if it distracts people from their school, work, family, or social life.



Other addictions can be to the internet, video games, sports, sex, eating disorders and criminal behaviour.

Signs of addiction

Spotting the signs of addiction can be difficult. This is because different types of addiction can have their own individual symptoms. Similarly, people with addiction may also have mild to moderate signs, depending on the extent and duration of their addiction. Some people can be good at hiding their symptoms too.

Signs of addiction usually involve a mixture of physical, mental, and behavioural changes. If someone in your team is misusing drugs or alcohol, you may notice symptoms of this such as:

- frequent absence from work
- decline in performance or productivity
- accidents or near misses
- changes in behaviour

Employees with behavioural addictions may also have similar symptoms as those with substance addictions. They may be restless or irritable when they're unable to engage in the activity they're addicted to.

Substance use can lead to health complications such as:

- stroke
- seizures

- memory loss
- muscle breakdown
- liver failure

Globally, around 150,000 people die from drug overdose each year. In 2023, there were 5,448 deaths related to drug poisoning in England and Wales.

People with a mental health issue such as anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), may use substances (drugs or alcohol) to ease their symptoms.

However, in the long-term, this substance use might make their symptoms worse.

For example, cannabis increases the risk of anxiety and depression. Stimulant drugs such as cocaine can make people feel depressed, paranoid, or anxious.



How to support employees who are experiencing addiction

Employers have a legal responsibility to protect their employees' health, safety, and wellbeing.

Your business might benefit from implementing a policy on alcohol and drug misuse, if one isn't already in place. The policy should aim to help and support employees affected by substance addiction, rather than dismissing them. The policy should also include disciplinary action where necessary such as in cases of drug possession at work.

As a manager, you could consider providing employees time off to seek expert help for their addiction if they need it. The cost of recruiting a new employee may be more costly to your business than providing time off, so you may wish to consider this. Remember to be understanding of what your team member is going through.

Consider what things might have led to substance abuse, such as a difficult situation

they've faced, or they may have a family history of addiction.

People with addiction can face stigma or negative attitudes even though their addiction is something they can't control. That can make it harder for them to seek treatment or tell people about their addiction.

If your employee approaches you to let you know they are experiencing addiction, thank them for telling you. It's then important to take steps to provide support and get them the help they need.

You should encourage employees with addiction to talk to a GP so that they can seek treatment. Or you could point them towards your organisation's occupational health service or employee assistance programme if you have one.



If you think an employee is experiencing addiction, you may wish to raise it with them in a private discussion. Below are some tips to remember.

- **Let them know that the discussion is confidential**, but some information sharing may be necessary.
- **Use open and non-judgemental questions** such as “You seem very tired recently, how are you feeling?”
- **Try not to make assumptions**, as there may be other reasons why their behaviour has changed that are unrelated to addiction.
- **Provide specific examples of behaviour at work that has caused concern** such as unkempt dress, punctuality, or a change in attitude.
- **Make sure they don’t feel pressured or judged.** Avoid outwardly using the terms ‘addiction’ or ‘addict’. Instead, try saying ‘excessive use’ or ‘frequent use’ when talking about substance misuse.

If they disclose that they’re dealing with addiction, let them know about the support available to them. If they deny there’s an issue or aren’t willing to discuss this with you, then respect this and bring the conversation to a conclusion. It might be helpful to stay aware of their behaviour for a period of time in case the problems do not improve. Try to ensure your employee doesn’t become the subject of gossip or rumours at work.

Organisations for people with addiction

Employees should be encouraged to speak to a GP if addiction is affecting their health. There are also many support charities and organisations they can go to for support. [Action on Addiction](#) is a great resource for anyone affected by addiction.

Support for alcohol addiction

As well as those within the NHS, there are charitable alcohol support groups all over the country that you can join, such as [SMART Recovery](#).

As well as those within the NHS, there are charitable alcohol support groups all over the country that you can join, such as [SMART Recovery](#). There are also groups, such as [Al-Anon Family Groups](#), which support the families of those with problem drinking.

Support for smoking addiction

The Smokefree National Helpline has trained advisors that can offer advice and help.

0300 123 1044

(Monday to Friday 9am to 8pm,
Saturday and Sunday 11am to 4pm)

Local stop smoking services can be found by visiting:

- [Better Health](#) (England)
- [Help Me Quit](#) (Wales)
- [Quit Your Way](#) (Scotland)
- [Stop Smoking](#) (Northern Ireland)

Drug addiction

Employees can find support with drug addiction through their local [NHS drug and alcohol service](#), or one of the following drug support organisations.

- [DrugWise](#)
- [FRANK](#)
- [Cocaine Anonymous UK](#)

Gambling addiction

Employees struggling with gambling addiction can seek support and advice from gambling support charity [GamCare](#).

Find out more

Resources

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