

Leveraging peer support for workers who are addicted to opioids

Opioid addiction is a mental health disorder that can cause individuals to feel stigmatized, misunderstood, and isolated. If these individuals feel socially isolated or excluded at work, especially when they are in the early stages of recovery, these feelings will worsen. Research shows that a lack of social support is the number one risk factor for developing a mental health problem after experiencing a personal hardship—connection with others is key to rebuilding their sense of community.

Employers must do everything they can to protect their workers' well-being, including their mental health. This means supporting workers who are struggling with a mental illness or addiction. One way to support employees with mental health and addiction issues is by offering a workplace peer support program. Peer support is a proven, effective method of support for people with mental health challenges.

What does peer support look like in the workplace?

In a workplace peer support program, employees with shared addiction experiences connect and provide mutual support in areas like mental health, recovery, stress management, and personal challenges. Because they have firsthand experience, peers can relate to and support others in ways that traditional healthcare providers can't. Peer supporters can be other workers or professional, trained peer supporters. A typical peer support program includes regular group meetings or one-on-one sessions, where participants share their experiences.

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An effective peer support program should:

- Create a workplace culture of trust and acceptance
- Increase hope, self, esteem, and empowerment
- Connect workers to other supportive resources

How can peer support benefit my organization?

Offering mental health resources shows that you care about employees' well-being. Beyond being the right thing to do, peer support can reduce the impact of mental illness and addiction by improving worker satisfaction and productivity.

Studies from Mental Health Innovations show that peer support programs have benefited workplaces in several ways:

- Fewer long-term disability (LTD) claims
- Increased use of Employee Family Assistance Programs, psychological services, and wellness programs
- Reduced mental-health related sick leave
- Shorter absences when sick time is taken
- More positive and inclusive workplace culture around mental health

Other resources

- Workers facing addiction can also access peer support outside of the workplace. Encourage employees to connect with community based peer groups, such as the All People, All Pathways program from the Canadian Addiction Peer Support Association. Narcotics Anonymous is another option.
- Encourage employees to register for mental health-related training, such as IHSA's *The Working Mind for the Trades - Worker* (Virtual) or *Occupational Mental Health*. Both courses are available at [IHSA.ca/training](https://www.ihsa.ca/training).
- Review IHSA's mental health safety talks—such as “Work Stress and Burnout” or “Opioids in the Trades”—with your staff, and promote an open dialogue about mental health and addiction.