

Improving social relationships for workers who are addicted to opioids

Socializing and connecting with others are essential for both mental and physical health. However, individuals struggling with opioid addiction often isolate themselves, increasing their risk of self-harm and further substance use.

Intense feelings of loneliness are closely linked to risky drug behaviors. For example, people who use opioids may begin using more often or alone, distancing themselves from others who could help in the event of an overdose. Plus, this isolation can intensify feelings of shame and guilt surrounding substance use.

When individuals feel socially connected, they are more likely to seek help and confide in others, which can significantly improve their chances of recovery.

If somebody in your workplace is struggling with opioid use, you can help them feel more socially connected in the following ways:

Show empathy: Let your co-worker know that you care about their well-being and are there for them. Be non-judgmental and offer a listening ear.

Encourage communication: Invite your co-worker to share their feelings and experiences. Assure them that it's okay to open up and that you will listen without judgment.

Suggest supportive resources: Recommend resources such as support groups, counseling services, or helplines where they can find help and support for both their substance use and feelings of isolation.

Respect boundaries: Honour your co-worker's privacy and boundaries. Avoid pushing them to talk if they're not ready, but reassure them that you're available whenever they need someone to confide in.

Be inclusive: Cultivate a supportive and inclusive work environment where everyone feels valued and accepted.

Seek professional help: If your co-worker's drug use is affecting their work performance or overall well-being, encourage them to reach out to a healthcare provider or addiction specialist for professional support. Encourage workers to seek out community-based peer support networks, especially if they are in early recovery.

Remember, supporting a co-worker who is dealing with substance use issues requires empathy, understanding, and patience. It's important to approach the situation with care, respecting their feelings and privacy.

What should employers do to help?

Employers must do everything they can to protect workers' mental well-being, and a supportive workplace can make a big difference in a worker's addiction recovery. Employers can help workers improve their social relationships at work in the following ways:

- Establish a workplace peer support program. In peer support arrangements, trained support workers who have lived experience with addiction provide social and emotional support to workers who are struggling. Peers can empathize in ways that therapists or healthcare workers can't.
- Share educational resources with all staff to improve overall understanding of addiction and mental health issues. Direct workers to credible sources of information, such as the Canadian Mental Health Association, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, the Mental Health Commission of Canada, and Health Canada.
- Review mental-health related resources with workers, such as IHSA's *Opioid Crisis in the Trades and Worker Mental Health* toolkits, or the *Opioid use and workplace implications for trade sectors guide (W032)*.
- Register workers for mental-health related training, such as IHSA's *Naloxone* eLearning course.