



The Place For Wellness

Businesses Must Join the Fight Against Addiction

George knows that his drinking has been getting out of control. He just can't stop after a couple of beers and lately he has been having a drink before work to settle his nerves. Somewhere along the way, his body crossed the threshold between abusing alcohol and addiction, but he doesn't want to admit it – to himself or anyone else.

Estimates suggest that more than 20 million Americans have a problem with alcohol and millions more are addicted to drugs. Each day 6,600 people start abusing prescription medication. 50% of all traffic deaths involve drugs or alcohol, and the cost to business in absenteeism, lower productivity, and mistakes is calculated in billions of dollars.

One of the most disturbing statistics is the estimate that 87.4% of the people with a substance abuse problem are not seeking help. They try to hide their problem from family, friends, and their employers. As long as this continues, the problems tend to multiply until a crisis occurs – an accident, a DUI, a broken marriage, loss of a job, or an even larger problem.

There are many reasons why people avoid getting help. Certainly the largest is the nature of addiction, with the psychological symptoms of denial, rationalization and minimization. Addiction plays tricks with the mind and constantly convinces its victim that the problem is not as large as it is, or that life is better with their drug of choice, or there is simply no escape. But the largest obstacle is often the fear of admitting an addiction -- apprehension about how others will respond to the knowledge that drugs and alcohol have become a serious problem.

For generations our society has judged people with addiction as morally weak. The inability to stop drinking or using was thought to be a sign of poor character, or a lack of willpower and courage. Even though we now recognize that addiction is a disease with biologic and environmental sources of origin, we often place a stigma on those who have an alcohol or drug problem. This encourages people to keep their sickness hidden, avoiding treatment, and the life-long care that is required for any chronic disease.

So how should business respond to this growing epidemic that carries such a heavy cost? Often the response has been drug testing and warnings of serious consequences for those who are found to be under the influence at work. This is an important initiative to protect the business, and the safety of employees.

However, the missing piece is often the encouragement that leads people to seek treatment. When management sends a clear message that it wants its workforce to be healthy and addiction free, employees are more willing to acknowledge addiction problems and seek treatment. When management lets its workforce know that addiction is a problem that

needs treatment – and that it will stand by those employees who reach out for help – the culture of denial begins to change. Drug testing by itself can drive addiction into hiding. Management support for treatment can help people gain the resolve to acknowledge the power of this disease, and seek help before the consequences become too great to ignore.

Addiction has no favorites. It destroys the lives of millions without regard for position, intelligence, character or gender. It is a growing crisis that requires strong voices to encourage people to get help for their addiction and overcome the denial that lets it progress and destroy. Let each of us have the resolve to challenge others to get help for this chronic disease, while also letting them know that we will offer support on their journey of recovery.

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