

PREVENTING THE MISHAPS OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE

The previous article attempted to address the problem of intoxication in the workplace. The article went to the extent of providing a definition of alcoholism as well as making reference to some case law relating to dealing with the problem of intoxication in the workplace. Since the previous article and this article is on substance abuse, it would therefore be appropriate to define substance abuse within the workplace context.

Substance abuse refers to the harmful use of alcohol or drugs by an employee, which has or may have a damaging effect on that employee's work performance and productivity and his or her relationship with others in the workplace (McCann, Burnhams, Albertyn & Bhoola 2011:310).

In the previous article, reference was made to item 10(3) of the Code of Good Practice in Schedule 8 of the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995, which indicates that in the case of certain incapacity; for example alcoholism or substance abuse, counselling and rehabilitation may be appropriate steps for an employer to consider. This provision places a duty/obligation on the employer to do their utmost to assist the employee to overcome the problem of substance abuse. However, as was explained in the previous article; disciplinary measures may be instituted in appropriate circumstances. The following are indications of the substance abuse problem.

Clinical indications

Clinical indication of substance abuse, according to McCann *et al.* 2011:139, include hangovers, red and bleary eyes, hand tremors, flushed face, morning and lunchtime drinking. The authors further indicate that cannabis users, bloodshot or glassy eyes and persistent cough may be present. An employee might display emotional indicators such as nervousness or jitteriness and edginess or irritability. Sometimes an employee might experience mood changes such as intolerance, and undue sensitivity to others' opinions.

Deteriorating job performance

Procrastination occurs and more decisions and work are put off, there is inevitable deterioration in job performance, work takes longer to do and more errors are committed, details are overlooked, strange excuses are given for absence from the workplace or for work delays, and the employee is found to be unreliable.

Employee relations

The employee may develop an aggressive or argumentative attitude which can seriously affect the efficiency and performance of a work group. The employee is irritable, over-sensitive to criticism, has paranoid tendencies, and is unpredictable, with mood swings occurring particularly after lunch or tea breaks.

Appearance

The employee's physical appearance can signify that he or she is experiencing drinking or drug problems. He or she may have a puffy face, red and bleary eyes and a generally unkempt appearance, hand tremors, shivering, sweating and other medically related signs, both acute and chronic, smell of alcohol on breath; particularly in the period following a lunch or tea break, as well as the often use of scent or deodorant to mask the pungent smell that burning hemp emits.

The supervisor's role

The supervisor, since he/she interacts with the employee almost on a daily basis, can identify an employee with a substance abuse problem. Having identified the employee with a problem, the supervisor needs to bring the identified problem to the attention of the said employee with the aim of helping him/her. They can indicate how the problem has affected the employee's work performance and/or relations with other employees, and encourage the employee to change their behaviour.

It was indicated in the previous article that the employee with a substance abuse problem needs to be referred to the Employee Health and Wellness Component (EHWP) for assistance. However, it is imperative that the supervisor must have tried to address the problem with the employee concerned as he/she will have to indicate to the EHWP what he/she has done to address the problem. That is very important as it promotes interaction and enhances healthy communication between the supervisor and employee/s.

Confidentiality must always be maintained as it can enable the employee to always have confidence in their supervisor and, as such; can confide in him/her. If the problem proves serious, the supervisor can, with the consent of the employee, refer the matter to the EHWP Component for their professional intervention. If the employee refuses to be referred to EHWP Component, his problem could be viewed as misconduct warranting appropriate disciplinary proceedings to be instituted against him/her.

If an alcohol or drug abuse problem is detected early, the employer can take steps to help the employee and minimise the losses due to poor employee performance.

REFERENCES

McCann, M., Burnhams, N.H., Albertyn, C. & Bhoola, U. 2011. *Alcohol, Drugs & Employment*. Claremont: Juta.

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