

SUBSTANCE USE AND MENTAL HEALTH IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WORKPLACE



Comorbid substance use and mental health disorders can have significant impacts on employees and the workplace.

This means that a person has both disorders at the same time that can lead to a worsened outcome.¹ Both disorders can have a profound effect on a worker's ability to remain focused on the job.² For example, drugs and alcohol can alter the brain's ability to function properly and can cause workplace accidents, absenteeism, and a reduction in productivity.^{3,4} While mental illness, such as depression, is a leading cause of disability, absenteeism, and lost productivity.⁵

OTHER IMPLICATIONS

- Approximately 80% of persons with depression reported some level of functional impairment because of their depression, and 27% reported serious difficulties in work and home life.⁵
- According to the World Health Organization, depressive disorder is the most common mental health illness, and affects more than 300 million individuals worldwide.⁶
- It is estimated that in 2020 the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic significantly increased these disorders, 26% and 28% respectively, bringing the total number of those affected to more than 1.2 billion people.⁷
- Research shows that rates of depression vary by occupation and industry type. Among full-time workers aged 18 to 64 years, the highest rates of workers experiencing a major depressive episode in the past year were found in the personal care and service occupations (10.8%) and the food preparation and serving related occupations (10.3%).⁵

The ability to identify mental health or substance use disorders in the workplace is complicated due to employee concerns about confidentiality, stigma, and fear of employment repercussions. However, many times the employee's adverse behavior related to substance use or mental illness can lead to employment counseling or other employment action that provides them with opportunity and encouragement to seek help.

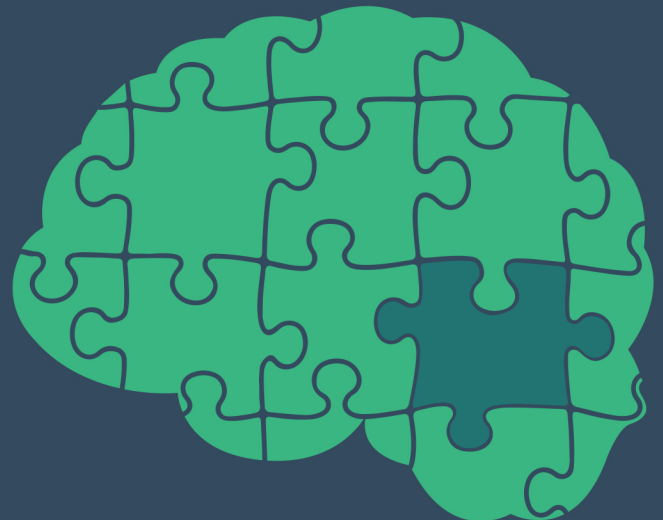
EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC

The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic increased economic, unemployment, and psychological stressors in peoples' lives. Suffering through any of these traumas can cause a person's mental health to worsen and can cause the initiation of substance use or a relapse in substance use recovery.^{8,9} Additionally, an increase in the stressors can also negatively affect peoples' immune response making them more vulnerable to the COVID -19 virus.⁸

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a study compared the reports of mental distress and substance use amongst essential workers and nonessential workers.¹⁰ Both essential workers and nonessential workers reported mental distress and substance use during the COVID-19 pandemic. Essential workers were more likely to report poor mental health and substance use compared to nonessential workers.¹⁰

The results:

- Symptoms of anxiety and depressive disorder: 42% essential workers, 30% nonessential workers.
- Initiation or continuation of substance use to cope with stress or emotions related to COVID-19: 25% essential workers, 11% nonessential workers.
- Suicidal thoughts: 22% essential workers, 8% nonessential workers.



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WORKPLACE WELLNESS CULTURE

Creating a culture of wellness, especially focused on health and safety, can provide both employees and employers with a wealth of benefits.⁶

Here are some of the program components that employers should consider:

- Comprehensive drug-free workplace policies that discourage the use of drugs and alcohol in the workplace and support those in recovery from a substance use disorder.¹¹
- Prevention through information, education, and training programs addressing alcohol and drug use or misuse and mental health awareness, preferably as part of wider health promotion programs.^{11,12}
- Drug testing to identify or confirm substance use problems and initiate a referral for assistance or treatment.¹¹
- Employee Assistance Programs or interventions to address identified behavior problems, including assistance in addressing substance use, referral to treatment, rehabilitation programs, and returning to work.^{11,12}
- Employment support for all employees including those who have sought mental health or substance use treatment and have returned to work. Among these are the Employee Assistance Program, peer support programs, paid time off, health insurance programs that cover mental and behavioral health needs, and wellness programs.¹³
- Implementation of a variety of wellness and intervention programs that have shown positive impacts on various mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. These activities include: mindfulness training, yoga, stress management or stress reduction programs, work-focused cognitive behavioral therapy in combination with individual work support, mental health literacy, exercise, and team-based participatory intervention.^{6,12}

BENEFITS

Direct financial benefits to employers include:

- Reduced health benefit expenses
- Reduced insurance premiums
- Decreased absenteeism
- Increased worker productivity

Other benefits include:

- Improved employee morale
- Reduced stigma associated with substance abuse and mental health disorders
- Decreased disciplinary actions
- Demonstrated commitment to employee health and safety
- Decreased theft and property damage

Benefits for the employee include:

- Personal health and wellness support
- Retention of job and benefits
- Company culture of caring
- Employer's commitment to a safe and healthy work environment

Both employers and employees reap the many rewards of openly addressing the issue of comorbid substance use and mental health disorders in the workplace.

¹ NIDA. 2018, August 1. Comorbidity: Substance Use Disorders and Other Mental Illnesses DrugFacts. Retrieved from <https://nida.nih.gov/publications/drugfacts/comorbidity-substance-use-disorders-other-mental-illnesses> on 2022, September 7. ² National Alliance on Mental Illness. (2020, May 1). Common with Mental Illness: Substance Use Disorders. Retrieved from <https://www.nami.org/About-Mental-Illness/Common-with-Mental-Illness/Substance-Use-Disorders> on 2020, June 9. ³ Kentuckiana Health Collaborative. (2019). Opioids and the Workplace: An Employer Toolkit for Supporting Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery. Retrieved from <https://www.khcollaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/KHC-Opioids-and-the-Workplace-Toolkit-Version-1.2.pdf> on 2020, June 9. ⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018, February 1). Workplace Health Promotion: Alcohol and Substance Misuse. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/workplacehealthpromotion/health-strategies/substance-misuse/index.html> on 2020 June 9. ⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019, April 10). Workplace Health Promotion: Mental Health in the Workplace. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/workplacehealthpromotion/tools-resources/workplace-health/mental-health/index.html> on 2020 June 9. ⁶ Wolff, J., & et al. (2018, January 1). Preventing Disease Through a Healthier and Safer Workplace. Retrieved from <https://extranet.who.int/iris/restricted/bitstream/handle/10665/272980/9789241513777-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> on 2020 June 9. ⁷ World Health Organization. (2022, August 6). Mental disorders. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-disorders>. Accessed 30 September 2022. ⁸ Nagelhout, Gera E., et al. "How Economic Recessions and Unemployment Affect Illegal Drug Use: A Systematic Realist Literature Review." International Journal of Drug Policy, vol. 44, June 2017, pp. 69–83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2017.03.013> ⁹ Hamel, Liz, et al. "KFF Health Tracking Poll – July 2020." Kaiser Family Foundation, 14 Aug. 2020. <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/report/kff-health-tracking-poll-july-2020/> ¹⁰ Czeisler, Mark E., et al. "Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation during the COVID-19 Pandemic – United States, June 24–30, 2020." MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, vol. 69, no. 32, 2020, pp. 1049–1057. <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6932a1>. ¹¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018, February 1). Workplace Health Promotion: Policies-Alcohol and Substance Misuse Evaluation Interventions. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/workplacehealthpromotion/health-strategies/substance-misuse/interventions/policies.html> on 2020 June 10. ¹² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018, February 1). Workplace Health Promotion: Programs-Alcohol and Substance Misuse Evaluation Interventions. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/workplacehealthpromotion/health-strategies/substance-misuse/interventions/programs.html> on 2020 June 10. ¹³ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration-Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (2010, January 1). Partners for Recovery - Supporting Our Greatest Resource: Addressing Substance Use, Misuse and Relapse in the Addiction Treatment Workforce. Retrieved from https://www.naadac.org/assets/2416/substanceuse_misusetoolkit9.pdf on 2020 June 10.

