



Prescription Drug Addiction

Could one of your coworkers be addicted to prescription drugs?

Prescription drug addiction continues to adversely affect millions of Americans. According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), approximately 48.7 million Americans—that's 18% of the population—reported nonmedical use of prescription drugs in 2009, not including over-the-counter drugs. That number has more than tripled from the 15.1 million Americans who reported abusing controlled prescription drugs in 2003. In fact, the misuse of prescription drugs is now more widespread than abuse of all types of illegal drugs combined (except for marijuana).

Effects of Prescription Drug Abuse

Many employees suffer from the negative effects of prescription drugs. Addiction to prescription drugs results in drug seeking behavior, cravings, and severe physical and psychological withdrawal symptoms—and their misuse can be just as deadly as heroin, cocaine, or other street drugs. Currently, prescription drug abuse accounts for 23% of all drug related emergency room admissions and more than 20% of all single drug related emergency room deaths. In the past three years, emergency room admissions caused from the abuse of controlled prescription medication has grown three to four times faster than admissions for heroin or cocaine use.

In addition to the adverse physical and emotional effects of prescription drug addiction, the disease also predisposes abusers to street drug use. Research has shown that people who abuse controlled prescription drugs are twice as likely to use alcohol, five times more likely to use marijuana, 12 times more likely

to use heroin, 15 times more likely to use ecstasy, and 21 times more likely to use cocaine.

Most prescription drug addiction starts as a result of being legally prescribed drugs such as antidepressants or painkillers for a legitimate complaint which then develops into dependence or abuse. The result is that many end up addicted to the legal drugs and start to obtain them illegally. Ultimately, this can end up in the abuse of illicit drugs.

Commonly Abused Drugs

The most common types of drugs that lead to prescription drug addiction include opiates, central nervous system (CNS) depressants, and stimulants. Opiates are most commonly prescribed to control pain. Some examples of these drugs are: Oxycontin, Percocet, and morphine. CNS depressants are usually prescribed to treat sleeping disorders and include drugs such as Valium and Xanax. Stimulants are usually prescribed for those with obesity, or for someone who is diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Some examples include Adderall or Ritalin.

Prescription Drug Abuse at Work

The abuse of prescription drugs, especially controlled substances, is a serious safety and health problem in the American workplace today. Often, the last people we would suspect of drug addiction are our coworkers, but the truth is that people addicted to prescription medication come from all walks of life.

While the vast majority of people comply with the controlled substance laws and use their medication in a responsible and law abiding manner, you should be aware that

according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), more than 77% of drug users are employed. Statistically, there is a good chance that a coworker could be abusing prescription drugs. Unfortunately, employees sometimes abuse their medications seeking relief from stress, to overmedicate, or to try to improve work performance and alertness.

Employees too often avoid dealing with drug impairment in coworkers. There is a natural reluctance to approach a coworker suspected of drug addiction. There is the fear that speaking out could anger the coworker, resulting in retribution. However, if you suspect that a colleague or coworker is abusing controlled substances to support a substance abuse problem, you have a legal and ethical responsibility as a citizen and as an employee to uphold the law and to help protect the individual, society, and your workplace from drug abuse. If you have reason to believe a coworker is abusing prescription drugs, it's time to demonstrate concern. You may jeopardize a person's future if you cover up or don't report your concerns. Many well-educated, highly trained, and experienced professionals lose their families, careers, and futures to substance abuse. Tragically, some workers have even lost their lives to their drug addiction because the people who saw the signs and symptoms of their drug use refused to get involved.

The following are recommendations for responding to a coworker's drug abuse:

- Observe your coworker's behavior if you suspect that he or she suffers from prescription drug abuse. Document those actions that you think relate to abusing drugs and report your findings to the human resources department. Report only the behaviors that you've witnessed.
- Tell your immediate supervisor if you believe that a coworker is abusing prescription drugs at work. Write down dates and times of the incidents. If you don't feel comfortable handing over your notes, tell your supervisor only what you've observed.
- Call your company's anonymous hotline. Some companies provide a hotline that their employees are allowed to call anonymously during or after work hours. This is a perfect way to help your coworker if you're uncomfortable confronting him or her for fear of retaliation. Just call the hotline and make sure that your number is untraceable.
- Telephone the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). EAPs accept calls over their hotline through a number that's available 24 hours a day; you can call at your convenience to report any person abusing prescription drugs at work. You don't need to inform your supervisor or anyone else when you place a call to the EAP hotline.

To help us combat substance abuse, go to www.LiveDrugFree.org and click on "Donate!"