

Dealing with Employee Substance Abuse

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There are probably few situations more difficult for small business owners than suspecting an employee of substance abuse. Typical reactions include disbelief, feelings of betrayal, and reluctance to bring up the issue. Substance use disorders rarely 'go away' on their own, however, and an employee with such a problem poses several kinds of risk to a dental practice.

While the stereotype of an alcoholic or drug addict is generally negative, it's not unusual to hear that the employee of concern is someone who has been a valued member of the team before the problem developed. Substance use disorders are equal opportunity illnesses that affect about 10% of the population, and we know from the work done with addicted professionals that education, social status, and Zip codes are not protective factors.

Dentists can protect themselves and their practices by implementing a Drug-Free Workplace Policy before they are presented with the problem. A sample policy has been written for dental offices and can be found at <http://www.ada.org/prof/resources/topics/wellbeing.asp> in the Appendices of the *Dentist Well-Being Programs Handbook*, and will be included in the upcoming *Employee Office Manual* that will be available at <http://www.adacatalog.org>. Good information for small businesses is also available through the Department of Labor at <http://www.dol.gov/workingpartners/welcome>.

Many of the state dentist well-being programs have staff or volunteers who are able to offer sound advice to dentists who discover a substance abuse problem in a staff member. These people can be located in the *2004 Dentist Well-Being Programs Directory*, also available at <http://www.ada.org/prof/resources/topics/wellbeing.asp>. For additional information, contact Linda Keating at keatingl@ada.org or ext. 2622.

On a related note, September is National Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Month, recognition of the importance and effectiveness addiction treatment sponsored by the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment of the Department of Health and Human Services. Did you know, for example, that recovery rates are very high for health professionals who have participated in treatment and ongoing monitoring programs? Or that the recovery of one person can positively impact many people? Get more information at <http://www.recoverymonth.gov>.