

# IT'S OUR BUSINESS

Addressing addiction and mental health in the workplace

*Information for Leaders*



## Peer support programs in the workplace: Frequently asked questions

### Do peer support teams work?

Employers with successful peer support programs report increased use of their employee assistance program (EAP) or employee family assistance program (EFAP) and decreased unhealthy behaviour among co-workers. EAP/EFAP providers who track referral sources also report that peers are very successful in encouraging those who are experiencing personal problems to get help.

### Why is training for team members important?

Team members usually bring a lot of personal experience and attributes to the group. Training is essential to show individual team members how to best use their personal experiences to help others. Effectively encouraging others to get help is also a learned skill. Someone who feels pressured usually backs away. Too much advice can sound condescending and inappropriate. In addition, training can help team members feel more comfortable in taking on new challenges.

Informing employees about the types of training peer support team members receive helps build credibility for the peer support program and lets employees know the subject areas members of the team have knowledge about.

### How much will it cost?

Starting a peer support team doesn't have to be expensive! The most important asset—people—is already present in the workplace. Training the team

will likely require a financial or resource investment, but there are many free training opportunities available.

Effective training sources include your company's EAP/EFAP, AHS Addiction and Mental Health (and other addictions professionals) and other successful peer support teams. Brochures advertising the team's services can usually be produced in-house. Remember, they don't have to be expensive to be effective.

### Where will we find the people?

There are many different ways to select team members. Some companies welcome anyone who is interested; others select members who have experienced similar situations and circumstances. Some programs start with a tiny core of members who then reach out to others who they think will make effective peer supporters. Each organization has the flexibility to decide which approach it prefers.

What's most important is that members have an interest in helping others, a willingness to learn, the trust and respect of their co-workers and the ability to maintain confidentiality. Some programs also welcome family members of employees to the peer support team. Whatever an employer decides, the best approach is to keep the team a manageable size, about eight to 15 people. However, this is a guideline that can be adjusted based on the size of the workforce and number of worksites.

## Should there be equal representation on the team?

Many people struggle with this question. Remember, this is a group whose main function is to offer encouragement and support to others. Peer support team members can be wonderful ambassadors for the EAP/EFAP, for example, but they need to be separate from it. Having a small, caring and committed group is better than having a large number of members representing each work area, who may or may not have an interest in peer support.

## For more information

Alberta Health Services, Addiction and Mental Health offices offer a range of prevention and treatment services to assist businesses in managing workplace addiction and mental health concerns. For more information, and to find an addiction and mental health services office near you, please call the 24-hour Addiction Helpline at 1-866-332-2322 or the 24-hour Mental Health Helpline at 1-877-303-2642. For more workplace-specific resources, please visit: <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/2672.asp>



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## Providing support to employees: Frequently asked questions

**How do I support an employee with a family member who has a substance use issue, mental health issue or gambling problem? Should I give the employee time off to look after their family member when the family member is not coping with their addiction or mental illness?**

This is a tough question. First, talk with the employee about the services available through the company's employee assistance program (EAP) or employee and family assistance program (EFAP) or in the community, both for the employee and for the family member. If the employee gets help and begins to understand what is helpful and what is not, they may make different decisions about how they respond to their family member's substance use, mental health problem, or gambling. Another way of helping is to answer the question, "Is providing time off going to make the situation worse or better?" Time may just be what the employee and their family need. However, if granting time off becomes a regular occurrence, the employee will likely continue to look after the family member. This may inadvertently enable the family member to continue engaging in unhealthy behaviour.

**How can I help someone on my team without sticking my nose in their business?**

The easiest way is to focus concern for the employee on the changes that you have observed. Perhaps they no longer join the team for lunch, or they may appear withdrawn and preoccupied. Rather than saying, "Hey, I think your husband has an alcohol problem, and I think you should go to Al-Anon," try, "I'm concerned about you. You aren't joining us for lunch any more, and you don't seem to be your usual happy-go-lucky self. I don't know what's going on for you, and I don't need to know. But I just want to remind you that if it's something going on in your personal life, our EAP/EFAP program is a great resource that will likely be able to help."

**Should I be giving a person a break when they've got a lot going on at home?**

That depends. If their work performance has not been affected, and they are asking for vacation time with very little notice, an employer might be able to accommodate their request. If, on the other hand, the employee's attendance is sporadic, the quality of their work has declined and others on their team are complaining about them, talk to them about their change in performance and encourage them to seek help.

## Suggestions for how to use this information in the workplace

- Use what you have learned to discuss starting a peer support team in your workplace.
- If there is interest, visit other peer support teams to see how their programs operate.
- Watch for sessions on peer support programming at workplace conferences and training events.
- If a peer support team already exists, invite some members to attend the next supervisory meeting to talk about their services.
- If you decide to develop a team, write about your plans and goals for the program in the company newsletter. Sharing success stories from other programs is a great way to encourage use of the program.
- If you have an EAP/EFAP, ask your provider to track the number of referrals received from the peer support team. This can help you track how well the program is working.
- Ensure that employees and their family members are aware of the sources of help available. These can include resources available through the organization and in the community. Printed or emailed information can be sent home to employees and their families.
- Ask your EAP/EFAP provider or local addictions agency to hold an information session on the effects that substance use or other issues can have on families. Invite employees and their family members to attend.
- Invite a member of the local Al-Anon group to visit your workplace. He or she can talk about the program and how it helps family members.
- Involve family members on the peer support team.
- Consider having family members as EAP/EFAP representatives. They can be given specific training and be available to reach out to other family members.

## For more information

Alberta Health Services (AHS), Addiction and Mental Health offers information, prevention and treatment services through a province wide network of offices, facilities and funded services. Services include a toll-free helpline, prevention and education, detoxification, outpatient counselling, opioid dependency programs and residential treatment.

AHS, Addiction and Mental Health has counsellors with specific training in workplace issues. This allows us to better meet the needs of employees and supervisors, and to respond readily to referrals from the business community. Other specific services for the Alberta workplace include

- addictions-related information and prevention resources for the workplace
- addictions education, employer consultation and supervisory training
- the Addiction and Mental Health Business & Industry Clinic, which offers residential treatment for employees who have problems related to alcohol or other drugs

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## When issues at home affect the workplace

When an employee is experiencing a substance use, gambling or mental health concern, it often shows up at work. The quality or quantity of their work may decrease, mood swings may increase and the employee may be absent from work more often. Co-workers might complain about the employee “not pulling their weight.”

When the issue is in the employee's family, the effects may be a little harder to see. The employee might talk openly about a substance use problem or mental health concern at home, but it is more likely that they will keep it to themselves and attempt to solve it on their own.

The strain of dealing with someone else's addiction or mental health concern can affect an employee's behaviour and performance. Signs include

- appearing preoccupied at work
- seeming depressed or tired
- calling home often or receiving a lot of personal calls at work
- missing work or asking for time off or vacation with very little notice
- missing deadlines
- showing decreases in quality or quantity of work
- having strained relationships with co-workers
- causing co-workers to complain that the employee is “not pulling their weight”
- creating a safety risk because of their preoccupation with the problem

These are the same signs that might indicate that the employee is in distress themselves. In fact, a variety of personal issues can cause these types of changes in behaviour.

It can be helpful to have an understanding of how a concern at home can affect an employee's work performance, as illustrated by these two examples.

1. **Mike's wife has anxiety. He doesn't talk about it, but co-workers can always tell when she is not coping well. Mike is cranky and agitated and just not himself. His mind is not on his work, and he makes mistakes doing work he has done for years. Because he works in a safety-sensitive position, his co-workers don't feel safe working with him.**
2. **Cathy's teenage daughter has been experimenting with drugs. Sometimes she doesn't come home at nights, and because Cathy tries to wait up for her, she is often tired at work. Cathy doesn't know what to do. This morning she called in to see if she could take the remaining two weeks of her vacation starting immediately.**

***Problems at home often mean problems at work.***

If you notice an employee has been acting differently from their usual self, the first step is to check in with them, ask them if they are OK, and tell them that you have noticed they haven't quite been themselves lately. Next, ask if there is anything you can do to help or let them know you are always there if they need help with anything.

For more information on performance management and enabling, request the following handouts:

- Performance Management: Frequently Asked Questions (Handout 1, Module 7)
- Tips for Performance Management (Handout 2, Module 7)
- Performance Management: How to Tell That Employees Need Support (Handout 3, Module 7)
- When Performance Management Is Required (Handout 4, Module 7)
- Enabling in the Workplace (Handout 5, Module 7)

## For more information

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Information for Leaders & Employees

## How a person's substance use or mental illness affects families

When a family member is in distress, either related to substance use or mental illness, the whole family is affected. As the situation worsens, the family often tries harder and harder to adjust and cope.

Family members, including children, may make excuses for their loved one, even apologizing for their actions. They often assume their family member's responsibilities in an effort to maintain some sort of status quo. The spouse may need to take on the sole responsibility of parenting or become the main breadwinner. Children may begin caretaking for the family member struggling with the issue, or they may become responsible for their younger siblings.

Typically, there are three rules that family members learn to live by: don't talk, don't trust and don't feel.

### Don't talk

- Many families try hard to keep the situation a secret. Not talking about it allows the family to pretend it isn't there, or deny its impact on the family. By hiding the problem, the family may hope to avoid job loss, embarrassment and other consequences of public exposure.

### Don't trust

- Families affected by addiction and mental illness may have a hard time trusting. The more a loved one engages in unhealthy behaviour or is in distress, the less reliable he or she will become at home. There are often broken promises, as well as failed attempts to quit.

### Don't feel

- Family members often learn to bottle up their feelings and not to show their own anger, resentment, loneliness and feelings of rejection. As a defense mechanism, people put up walls to protect themselves in an unpredictable environment.

Trouble talking about the problem and trusting others may prevent employees and family members from reaching out to workplace programs for assistance. However, the longer the situation persists, the greater the stress on the individual, the family and the workplace, which can lead to larger complications, including declining work performance and, ultimately, dismissal. This is why offering education and assistance to employees is essential.

*"When my spouse was drinking, I tried so hard to cover it up. His boss even told me about the EFAP at a Christmas party, but I denied that there was anything wrong. One day, I'd had enough. I called the EFAP and got help myself—it was the turning point for me."*

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## What family members or co-workers can do to get help for themselves

An employee who lives or works closely with someone who needs help may also benefit from getting help for themselves. It's common for family members to react by saying, "I'm not the one with the problem. Why should I see a counsellor?" Similarly, an employee who has a troubled co-worker may not realize the impact their co-worker's behaviour has on them.

The following checklist can help someone determine if he or she is being affected by a family member or co-worker's behaviour:

1. *Do you worry about how much time someone spends on a certain activity (e.g., drinking, gambling, crying, sleeping, obsessing)?*

**Yes No**

2. *Do you feel that if the person cared for you enough, they would stop their behaviour (e.g., smoking, gambling or verbal abuse)?*

**Yes No**

3. *Do you have money problems because of someone's behaviour?*

**Yes No**

4. *Do you lie to cover up for someone's behaviour (e.g., too hungover to work or too depressed to host a child's birthday party)?*

**Yes No**

5. *Have you threatened to leave the relationship in order to scare the person into getting help?*

**Yes No**

6. *Have you been embarrassed or hurt by the results of this person's behaviour (e.g., intoxication, smelling of alcohol, verbal or physical abuse or social exclusion)?*

**Yes No**

If the respondent answers yes to any of these questions, then they are being affected by their family member's or co-worker's behaviour. If the issue is a co-worker, it is important for the employer to address any job performance concerns and try to direct the person toward help. If the issue is from the employee's personal life, they can seek information or help from their employee assistance program (EAP) or employee and family assistance program (EFAP), the addictions agency in their community or a self-help group like Al-Anon (for adults affected by someone else's drinking), Alateen (for teenagers affected by someone's drinking) or Nar-Anon (for adults affected by someone else's drug use). In addition, there are two **24-hour helplines for Albertans**: one for addiction (**1-866-332-2322**), and one for mental health (**1-877-303-2642**).

## Online resources:

### Alberta Health Services:

- <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/addiction.asp>
- <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/mentalhealth.asp>

### Alcoholics Anonymous:

- <http://www.aa.org>

### Canada Alcohol and Drug Rehab Programs:

- <http://www.canadadrugrehab.ca>

## For more information

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## Enabling

Over time, the behaviour of a person with a mental health, substance use or gambling problem changes. Family members, friends and co-workers usually work hard to adapt to these changes. It's natural to want to keep things running smoothly. However, these adaptations may not always be for the best.

As the problem continues, friends and family members often try harder and harder to adjust and cope. This creates more stress for all and often protects the person with the problem from experiencing the negative consequences of their behaviour. This is called enabling.

It's important for those around the person with the problem to realize that protecting them from the real consequences of their behaviour is not helpful. In fact, they may unintentionally be helping the problem to continue or get worse. Facing the consequences of their behaviour can help to motivate a person with the problem to change.

Here are some common examples of enabling behaviour:

- Glen is hungover and can't come in to work. His spouse Tina calls in sick for him, explaining that he has the flu. Tina is so tired of covering up for Glen. Guilty, angry, and ashamed of lying, she feels a sense of total despair. The more Tina covers for Glen, the more he is protected, and so his use continues. Tina has entered into an escalating cycle, where Glen's drinking gets worse, she covers up for him and he drinks more and more. Because of Tina's feelings of frustration and guilt, she is stressed at work and preoccupied by thinking about how to find

help for Glen. Her own workplace performance is declining, and her manager and co-workers are starting to notice this change.

- Sue and Rachel are friends at work. Rachel often comes in late and leaves early for work because she can't cope with her anxiety and depression from being there. She finds it hard to get out of bed in the morning to go to work. She often feels overwhelmed by the pressures of the job and looks for reasons to leave early. Sue feels like she is always covering for Rachel when others come looking for her and Rachel isn't there. Sue feels guilty and caught in the middle. She doesn't want Rachel to get in trouble, but also doesn't want to get into trouble herself.
- Stu is the team leader. Kelly has been working on his team for a long time. Lately, Kelly has been coming to work smelling of alcohol. Stu decides to "give Kelly a break" time and time again, rather than deal with her declining job performance.

It is important for employees to be able to recognize when they are covering up for somebody and to realize that this may not be helpful. Sure, everybody needs a hand now and then, but if there is a serious underlying problem, it's better that the person deal with it sooner than later. The longer a problem continues, the worse it gets, and the more difficult it can be for the person to recover. During this time, the consequences to the individual, their family and their co-workers can be devastating.

*Enabling behaviour usually puts off dealing with something that will only get worse. Every person who has a substance use or gambling problem will affect the lives of many others.*



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## Steps for peer support teams

Although it's important to tailor your peer support team to the needs of your colleagues and your workplace, there are some steps that almost all teams can take to get started. The following is a list of common peer support team tasks.

### Planning

#### **Step 1: Decide on the function and role of the team.**

Will team members assist co-workers in obtaining help when they are showing signs and symptoms of an addiction or mental health issue? Is the goal to publicize the company's employee assistance program (EAP) or employee and family assistance program (EFAP) and help employees use it? Will management emphasize a preventative approach by organizing workplace wellness events?

#### **Step 2: Get endorsement and support from top-level management.**

This is an important part of establishing the program. It will help ensure the success of the program through allocation of resources and employee time. It will also help embed the program into the culture of the organization.

#### **Step 3: Decide how often and where the team will meet.**

Will the team gather for training and information purposes only? Will they meet to plan events for the workplace? Will they meet to talk about the needs of team members? If the team is going

to stay strong and maintain itself over time, it is also important for them to meet to celebrate their successes.

#### **Step 4: Decide how people will contact the team.**

Some teams wait until their fellow employees approach them. However, it is sometimes very difficult for people to ask for help. Other teams encourage members to approach employees who they are concerned about. Successfully encouraging people to seek or accept help requires skill, and team members who undertake this should have special training. If team members come on too strong, offer advice or start telling their co-workers what to do, they may alienate workers and defeat the whole purpose of a peer support program. Remind the team that the goal is peer support, not peer pressure.

The peer support team will also have to decide if members will be available after work hours, or only during certain times of day. Will the services be available to employees only, or can team members also talk to family members?

#### **Step 5: Develop guidelines to handle confidentiality.**

Employees must be able to trust that they can get help from a member of their peer support team without anyone else finding out. This is the cornerstone of successful peer support programs. It is important for team members to establish clear confidentiality guidelines and to understand similar policies in the workplace,

such as those governing managers, occupational health staff and EAP/EFAP providers. New teams may also seek expert advice about confidentiality from a specialist in the field. A lawyer familiar with confidentiality guidelines, for example, can play an important part in the team's training.

## Recruitment and selection

### Step 6: Decide on the membership of the team.

There are many options. One is for team members to be appointed by management. Another is for people who are interested to volunteer. In some organizations, team members are nominated by their peers because they possess certain skills or are seen as credible and respected. In others, teams are formed at the grassroots level. For example, people who have successfully dealt with addiction or mental health issues may choose to give something back to their workplaces by offering to talk with others in similar situations.

The role of organized labour in promoting peer support is also very valuable. Some workplaces strive for a balance of union and non-union members on their teams.

### Step 7: Decide how the team will maintain itself.

Once a team of interested members has been identified, it needs to determine how it will sustain itself over time. Again, there are options. Some teams hold recruitment drives and then train and maintain the same group for a certain length of time. Other teams are made up of an evolving group of members who coach and train each other on an ongoing basis. Some teams choose to welcome new members a couple of times per year, ensuring that the necessary training occurs immediately after recruitment.

## Training

### Step 8: Identify training needs.

Peer support team members must recognize the importance of confidentiality, objectivity and listening without judgment. They must be trained to offer support and encouragement without trying to counsel. Team members are not expected to diagnose or fix problems themselves. Instead, they must be knowledgeable about the resources that are available to help employees. It is also valuable for them to receive training about addiction, grief and loss, depression, stress, suicide and financial problems, among other issues. Training can also be done on an ongoing basis, with various learning opportunities offered throughout the year.

## Implementation and activities

### Step 9: Maintain updated information about resources.

Some teams keep a list of community and company resources. One team member can be responsible for ensuring it is updated regularly. Many teams invite guest speakers from these groups and have them share information about their services.

### Step 10: Talk about how the team will promote services.

The team could publish a peer support brochure, develop promotional posters or have team members speak to employees at safety meetings or other work events. Some organizations make peer support team introductions part of the orientation process when they hire new staff. These are important decisions. Remind employers that they can start small and add new services as the team evolves.



## Evaluation and monitoring

### Step 11: Talk about how you will know your program is working.

Most teams want to know that their efforts are making a difference. This is an important part of keeping team members interested and encouraged to keep participating. It's also important to know whether the peer support team is doing a good job. Teams need to establish early how they will evaluate the success of the program.

Some ways that peer support teams can evaluate their activities are

- setting aside time at each meeting to talk about the number of contacts each member has made since the last meeting
- counting the number of referrals each member has made
- looking at the activities offered and identifying which were most effective
- getting feedback from outside the team

A written or online survey is one way to get feedback. Team members can ask all employees if they are aware of the peer support program, if they've used it and whether they were satisfied or if they have any suggestions for improvement. Those who have not used the program can be asked if they would use it. Evaluation can help the team enhance what is working well for the program and let go of the things that are not.

Remember that evaluation does not mean breaking confidentiality. It is not necessary to talk about specific cases or specific employees. Instead, it is helpful to talk about the process:

- Were referrals made?
- Did employees follow through?
- Have team members contacted them recently to make sure they are getting the help they need?

### Step 12: Ask what the organization will need from the team.

The organization is far more likely to support team activities if they can actually see that peer support is working. Evaluating the program and presenting the results to the organization is one way to demonstrate this. Some organizations may require that the team account for its hours and activities. Each team is unique and each organization may request different things from its team.

### For more information

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