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Recovery at Work: Integrating Recovery in an Evolving Drug-Free Workplace Program

For decades, employers have recognized the importance of drug testing to maintain workplace safety and to identify employees who may be misusing alcohol or other drugs. With the knowledge that addiction – also referred to as substance use disorder (SUD) – is a treatable, chronic brain disease rather than a character flaw or moral failure, drug-free workplace programs have evolved to also offer assistance and treatment (when needed) to employees who test positive.

But an evolving drug-free workplace program doesn't stop there. Workplaces that support employees coming out treatment – and working to maintain lifelong recovery – can:

- further protect the health, safety, and productivity of their workforce
- attract and retain people in recovery whose assets, strengths, and values are highly desirable in the workplace (e.g., integrity, hard work, commitment)
- increase the overall return on investment of their drug-free workplace programs

What is recovery, anyway?

Recovery from SUD can mean different things for different people, but at its core, it is the process of change people go through to improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and reach their full potential. And, as with other behavioral-related diseases (e.g., diabetes and heart disease), recovery from SUD requires lifelong management. It is a journey of health, healing, and growth – not a task that merely can be crossed off a list.

Recovery management is certainly an incredible feat, but the journey – and symptoms of SUD – can be scary, messy, and discouraging. A person in the throes of this disease is experiencing physical damage to parts of the brain (e.g., the prefrontal cortex) that are responsible for problem-solving, decision making, exerting self-control, and regulating emotion. This damage can manifest as lying, blaming, lashing out, shirking responsibilities at work or home, and making irrational decisions. Part of recovery is

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recognizing these behaviors as symptoms and committing to treatment designed to promote physical and emotional health. This is a lifelong process to manage and requires resilience and a lot of hard work, which can only be born of grit, determination, and a deep personal commitment to the process.

A common concern about those in recovery is that symptoms will reoccur – often referred to as relapse. The reoccurrence of symptoms can be a normal part of maintaining lifelong recovery. It happens, and typically means that treatment and recovery strategies need to be adjusted, similar to altering treatment plans if symptoms related to diabetes or other chronic diseases reoccur. Understanding what might trigger a reoccurrence of symptoms is an important part of recovery. For instance, payday could be a trigger – a time when the person might have previously overindulged in their use. Socializing with friends who still use or even driving places where use occurred can be triggering to a person on their recovery journey.

A person in lifelong recovery can minimize both the reoccurrence and severity of symptoms by recognizing personal warning signs and triggers and engaging learned coping skills when confronted with those situations. In addition to this growth area, other characteristics of sustained recovery include the development of:

1. **A strong support system:** At the heart of recovery is connection and a healthy, positive, and reliable social network which provides support, encouragement, and accountability. This system is typically made up of friends, family, neighbors, coworkers, supervisors, and support groups or others in recovery who understand the disease and recovery process and provide positive reinforcement and hope.
2. **A sense of purpose and direction:** Having a sense of contribution and responsibility brings meaning to a person's life. Employment, relationships, hobbies, faith-based activities, and other daily pursuits can all help a person sustain lifelong recovery.
3. **Safety and stability:** Having a safe and stable place to live is also important to recovery. It provides self-esteem and a layer of protection that an unstable living environment could not.

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4. **A dedicated focus on health and wellness:** Recovery requires a strong commitment and dedication to maintaining an overall sense of personal wellbeing – including both physical and emotional health. Additionally, having a practical understanding of the disease of addiction can accelerate successful management of the disease instead of being immobilized by guilt and shame.

Sustaining recovery is not for the faint of heart. And the personal assets required to maintain life-long recovery are both admirable and marketable in the workplace: the ability to chip away at large goals or projects with determination, discipline, commitment, sharp problem-solving and coping skills, grit, resilience, integrity, and an overall sense of gratitude.

What does it mean to support employees in recovery?

Supporting individuals in recovery doesn't have to be difficult or risky – it parallels employers' support of overall employee health, wellness, and productivity (e.g., employee assistance programs, a company culture that pays attention to emotional wellbeing). And at the heart of a recovery-supportive workplace is a comprehensive, best practice drug-free workplace program. That includes a written policy and procedures, annual employee education and supervisor training, drug testing, and a plan to assist employees who need it.

And while maintaining life-long recovery is ultimately up to the individual, employers can play an important role in supporting that recovery through:

- **Accommodation** – Depending on where one is on their recovery journey, individuals may need some temporary accommodations, including flexibility to attend required meetings or appointments, adjustments to job duties (if needed), and sensitivity to what may trigger a reoccurrence of symptoms
- **Commitment to health and wellness** – As businesses explore benefit programs to help lower insurance premiums and improve employee health and satisfaction, these efforts can have an added benefit of supporting one's recovery
- **Compatibility** – Is the job, environment, or culture a good fit for the employee in recovery? Consider whether and how employees may be exposed to triggers and offer warnings or adjustments when potentially triggering situations arise (e.g.,

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hosting a company-sponsored happy hour where individuals could feel pressured to drink alcohol)

What's the ROI of having a recovery-supportive workplace?

Employees are one of the most valuable assets a business has. With almost one in 10 U.S. adults overcoming issues with alcohol and other drugs there is a good chance your business either already employs or will employ someone who has been impacted by substance misuse.

Understanding recovery and having a recovery-supportive workplace not only fosters an environment where these individuals can thrive but is a logical step in evolving a drug-free workplace program to its full potential. Ultimately, it helps create an overall supportive business culture, enabling businesses to attract and retain quality individuals who can help grow and contribute to an employer's mission and improve the bottom line.

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