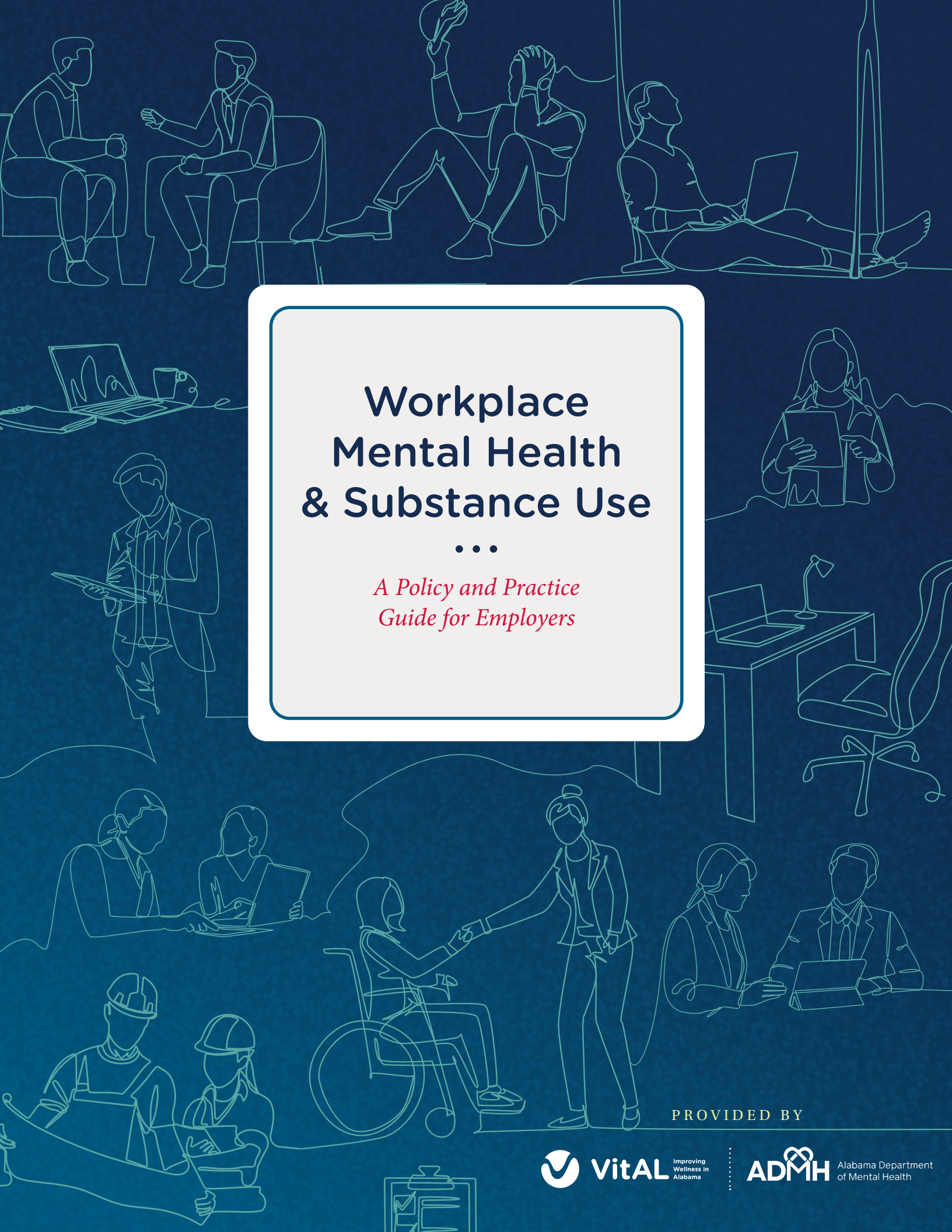




Workplace Mental Health & Substance Use

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*A Policy and Practice
Guide for Employers*

PROVIDED BY



The toolkit was developed by VitAL.

VitAL thanks the following individuals who created, drafted, and reviewed components in the *Workplace Mental Health and Substance Use: A Policy and Practice Guide for Employers*.

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Many Americans spend a large number of their waking hours at work. This means the time they spend at work directly influences their well-being more than many other parts of their lives.

Therefore, one could argue individuals in leadership positions in companies and organizations have an obligation to make sure they are creating an environment that promotes the well-being of their employees. There is also a benefit to the company itself because employees who are physically and mentally healthy are more productive and more likely to remain with their company.

While many employers may be motivated to improve the environment of their workplace, they may not understand all the potential factors that can improve or worsen employees' well-being. **This toolkit serves as an introduction to understanding the relationship between the workplace and employee well-being. The material in this toolkit will allow individuals to better understand what mental health is, how substance use may influence the lives of employees, and policies and actions that can be integrated to improve the workplace culture.**

Currently, one in five individuals have a mental health disorder so chances are there are many individuals in your company who could benefit from a healthy workplace culture. Nearly 49 million people in the United States ages 12 and older had a substance use disorder in 2022, up from 46.3 million just a year prior in 2021. These issues can sometimes go untreated and result in problems like substance use disorders, trouble concentrating at work, legal problems, relationship problems, reduced productivity at school or work, and impacts on physical health. It can also impact the company in multiple ways, including absenteeism, workplace safety, and employee turnover.

Mental health and substance use disorders can influence healthcare costs for an individual since the link between mental health and physical health is so strong. It was estimated that individuals with depression incur two to four times more in healthcare costs than other individuals enrolled in the same healthcare plan. Substance use disorders also cost companies money through absenteeism and sick days as well as reduced productivity. Creating a healthy workplace environment can help mitigate these costs and improve overall productivity for the company.

1 in 5
individuals
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health disorder



HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit is intended as an introduction to the topic of mental health, stigma, substance use/misuse, workplace culture evaluation, and actions that can improve workplace culture. However, there are also limitations to this toolkit as it is meant to be an introduction and doesn't cover all the topics in full detail.

This toolkit can be used to:

- Learn what mental health and substance use is and learn about their influence on the workplace.
- Gain an understanding of different mental health and substance use disorders and how they affect people.
- Debunk some common myths about mental health and substance use.
- Give suggestions about how to evaluate and improve workplace culture.

This toolkit should NOT be used to:

- Diagnose people with mental health or substance use disorders.
- Inform managers, supervisors, or administration how they 'should' run their workplace. Every organization is different and some of the suggestions in this toolkit might work better for some organizations than others.
- Justify forcing employees to seek treatment for mental health or substance use-related issues.
- Justify hiring or firing practices based on mental health or substance use. Discrimination based on these statuses is illegal.



MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE

Mental Health is a measure of how one feels about the well-being of their emotional, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual state. A person with positive mental health may feel relatively content about their life, be confident handling small life stressors, and feel capable of making an impact on their life and the life of others. A person's mental health can change over time and can be affected by many factors in one's life including life events, friends, family, and work. A person who is struggling with their mental health may have their everyday functioning impacted.

Signs a person may be struggling with mental health:

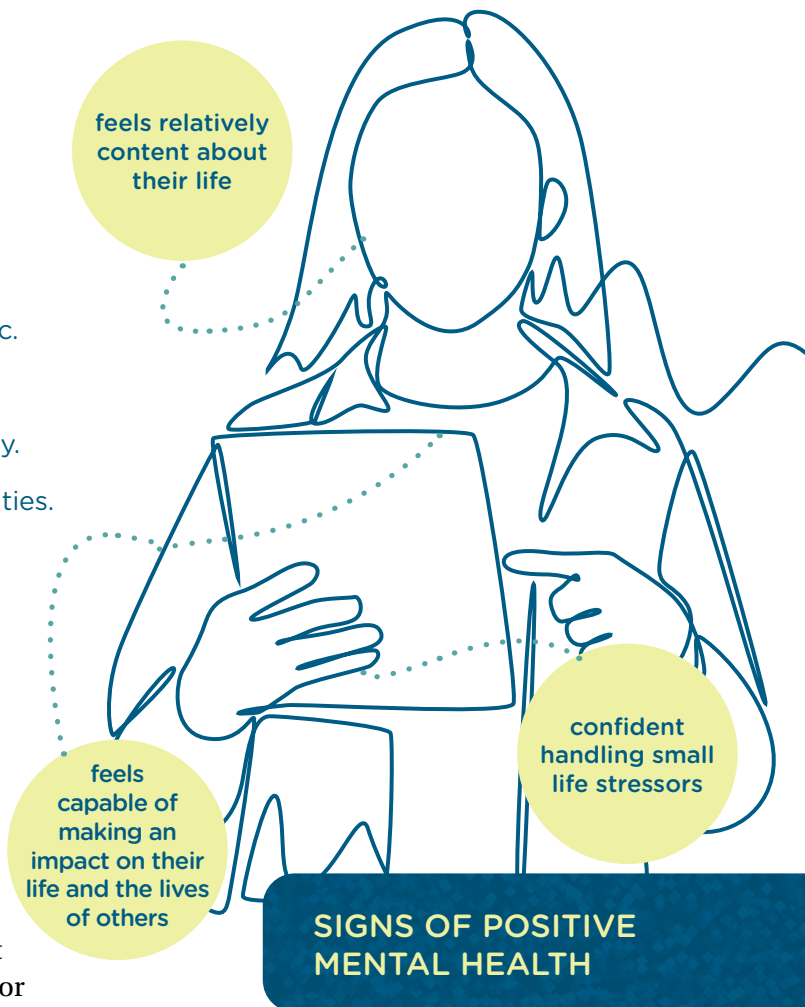
- ✓ Changes in eating or sleeping habits.
- ✓ Difficulty focusing or concentrating.
- ✓ Forgetting, being late to, or not showing up to appointments or obligations.
- ✓ Acting significantly different than one normally does.
- ✓ New and otherwise unexplained physical maladies like headaches, stomach aches, etc.
- ✓ Dramatic change in one's appearance.
- ✓ Unexplained decrease in work productivity.
- ✓ Less pleasure from normally enjoyed activities.

Environmental Factors

While our genetics and physical health influence our mental health, mental health is greatly influenced by our environment. Having supportive relationships, a positive workplace or family environment, and having adequate resources in your community can all contribute to positive mental health. On the other hand, outside stressors such as poverty, racism or discrimination of any kind, housing issues, conflictual relationships, and cultures that don't value mental health can all be risk factors for poor mental health.

What are Mental Health Disorders?

A mental health disorder is a diagnosis a person may be given to describe a component of their mental health that is negatively influencing their ability to function. Mental health disorders might affect emotions, thinking patterns, and/or behavior. Many mental health disorders can be treated with therapy and/or medication. Not all difficulties a person may experience with mental health would be considered a disorder as each disorder has its own set of criteria. We will not be describing this criteria in detail, but we will give a brief description of different mental health disorders.



COMMON MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS

Listed below are some common mental health disorders. Click the boxes to learn more.

Please remember the intention of this section is not to be a diagnostic guide. DO NOT try to diagnose others based on these descriptions. Diagnosis should only be made by a professional.



REMEMBER:

It is important to note a person might be struggling with their mental health but not fit the criteria to be diagnosed with a disorder. They still need support and could potentially benefit from professional help.

Mental health disorders do not affect an individual's intellectual ability; people living with mental health disorders are as capable intellectually as those not living with such disorders.

Some people believe individuals with mental health disorders are dangerous, but a vast majority of violent crime is committed by individuals without any diagnosable mental health disorder.

Mental health disorders affect people of all ages, races/ethnicities, genders, abilities, sexual orientations, and backgrounds. While some may be more susceptible than others, all people from all groups can be affected by mental health disorders.

Mental health disorders are sometimes hard to see. Individuals may appear productive and social but can be struggling internally.



DEPRESSION

Feeling sad is a normal human experience but clinical depression can be a mental health disorder that causes distress and impairs functioning. There are two kinds of depression that a person can experience:

1. **Major Depressive Disorder:** This is characterized by a person having what's referred to as a depressive episode. A depressive episode is a period that lasts at least two weeks and includes at least five of the following symptoms: Depressed mood, loss of interest in things a person normally enjoys, sleeping too much or too little, eating too much or too little, restlessness or slowing down of body, consistent fatigue or feeling tired, excessive feelings of shame or guilt, difficulty functioning or concentrating, or thoughts of death and suicide. A person with Major Depressive Disorder may have had only one depressive episode or several over the course of their life.
2. **Persistent Depressive Disorder:** This is a milder but more ever-present form of depression. A person with persistent depressive disorder may have fewer or less intense symptoms compared to a depressive episode, but these periods last for at least two years.

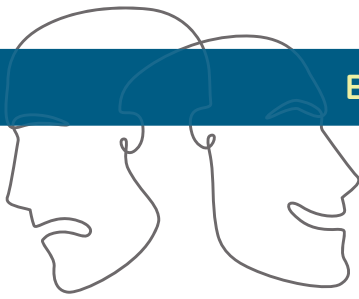


ANXIETY DISORDER

Everybody gets nervous or worried sometimes in their life. For some individuals, anxiety becomes overwhelming enough to impact their daily functioning.

1. **Generalized Anxiety Disorder:** Persistent worry that a person feels like they can't control for a period of six months.
2. **Panic Disorder:** Having panic attacks.
3. **Social Anxiety:** Excessive worry during social situations that causes distress to the person.
4. **Phobias:** Excessive fear response to a stimulus.
5. **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder:** Marked by a person having obsessive thoughts they can't control which manifest in some kind of compulsive behavior (such as checking something an excessive number of times, washing hands more times than necessary, or other repetitive or excessive behaviors that a person can't stop doing even if they want to).

Signs someone may be experiencing anxiety include excessive worry occurring for more than six days, difficulty controlling worry, and the anxiety and worry are associated with three (or more) of the following: restlessness, being easily fatigued, difficulty concentrating or mind going blank, irritability, muscle tension, or sleep disturbance.



BIPOLAR DISORDER

Bipolar disorder is often one of the most misunderstood mental health disorders. Having quick mood swings is not an indication of bipolar disorder. What marks a bipolar disorder is the presence of 'manic' state. This is a persistent elevated mood persisting for at least a week that is not typical for that person. A person who is manic may appear to have boundless amounts of energy, they may start multiple projects in a week but never finish any, spend an excessive amount of money, or appear especially agitated. A person with bipolar disorder may also experience depressive episodes.



POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Traumatic events are defined as a situation in which a person feels as though their life is in danger, sustains serious physical injury, or experiences sexual violence. Many people who experience a traumatic event have little to no long-term mental health issues from the event. However, some do experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is marked by three main symptoms:

1. **Avoidance symptoms:** Individuals with PTSD will avoid situations that may remind them of the event in some way.
2. **Intrusion symptoms:** Individuals with PTSD may have involuntary nightmares or flashbacks of the event that cause significant distress.
3. **Mood/thought related symptoms:** Individuals with PTSD may have periods of irritability, strongly negative thoughts, or feeling detached from others. They may also feel hypervigilant or very reactive.



PSYCHOTIC DISORDERS

Psychotic disorders are often some of the most difficult to understand for the general public. Individuals with psychotic disorders may experience thoughts that others may find strange or drastically unrealistic. They may also experience hallucinations in which they hear or see things that nobody else can hear or see. Many individuals with psychotic disorders experience high levels of stress, might struggle to interact with others, and may be detached or hypervigilant. However, psychotic symptoms can be treated with medication and therapy and many individuals with psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia can do well socially and in the workplace.

WHAT IS SUBSTANCE USE?

There are a variety of substances that are used recreationally. Different substances affect the mind and body in various ways, and risks associated with each may vary.

MOST COMMONLY MISUSED SUBSTANCES*

CATEGORY	IMPACT	EXAMPLES
STIMULANTS	speed up the nervous system	amphetamines, cocaine
DEPRESSANTS	slow down the nervous system	alcohol, benzodiazepines
OPIOIDS	create a sense of euphoria and are habit forming	fentanyl, heroin, oxycodone, hydrocodone, morphine
HALLUCINOGENS & DISSOCIATIVES	alter a person's perception of reality	LSD and magic mushrooms
INHALANTS	create a euphoric feeling; usually ingested as gases or fumes	acetone, gasoline
CANNABIS	has depressant-like effects and acts as a hallucinogen	marijuana

**This list is in no way comprehensive.*

To address substance misuse properly, it is important to understand the terminology and utilize it correctly. These key terms have distinct meanings but are often used interchangeably:

Tolerance

Tolerance is the amount of a drug required for a person to receive the same effect. The more a person consumes a specific substance, the higher their tolerance level becomes—essentially requiring more of a substance to get the same results it had at a lower tolerance level. When an individual stops using a substance for a period of time, their tolerance may decrease. When beginning to use again, the person may be unaware their tolerance has lowered and use more than their body can then handle, commonly resulting in an overdose.

Substance Use Disorder

Substance Use Disorder (SUD) is a medical condition associated with substance misuse and uncontrolled use of a substance. When someone is using a substance, the need for it may be driven by intense bodily cravings, and potentially lead to taking greater risks to procure the substance they are physically and psychologically dependent on. SUD can lead an individual to commit acts they otherwise would not do to obtain drugs. Substance use disorder affects the brain's reward system impacting decision making, impulse control and foresight. For instance, someone may pawn tools/jewelry or steal money or sellable goods to pay for drugs. SUD has a significant impact on relationships with family, friends, employers, and others.

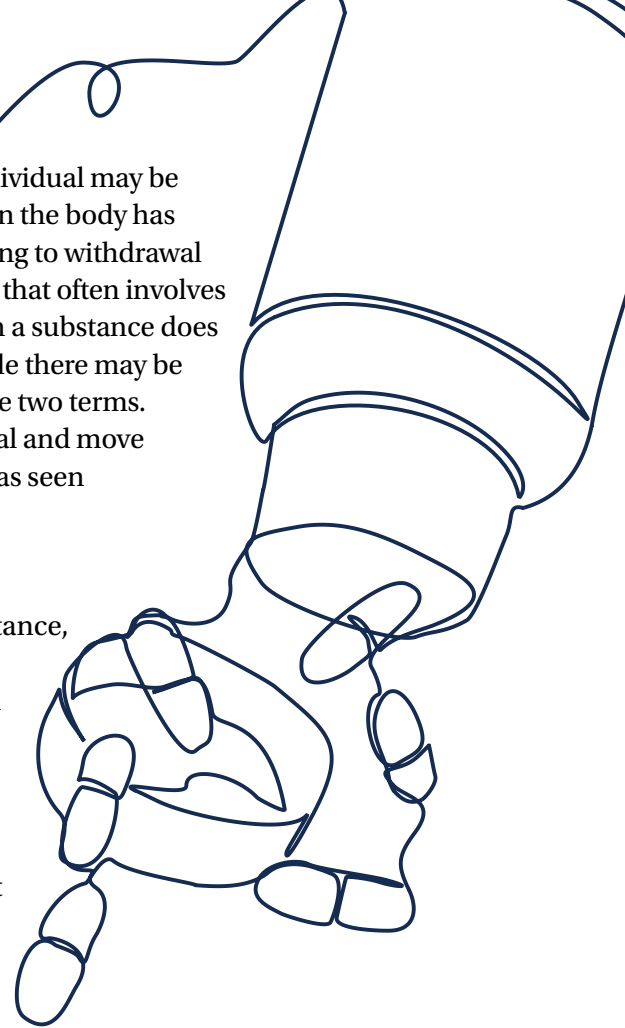


Dependence

Dependence is often mistaken as substance use disorder. An individual may be dependent on a drug but not addicted. Dependence occurs when the body has become accustomed to having a certain level of substance, leading to withdrawal when the level decreases. This is a physical response in the body that often involves diarrhea, muscle aches, or vomiting. Developing dependence on a substance does not mean a person has developed a substance use disorder. While there may be overlap, it is important to understand the distinction between the two terms. Someone with dependence on a drug may go through withdrawal and move forward without the urgent bodily drive to obtain the substance as seen in substance use disorder.

Overdose

Overdose occurs when the body has consumed more of a substance, or combination of substances, than it can handle. Overdose is a life-threatening condition and requires immediate medical intervention. While overdose can occur from a variety of substances, medications are available to reverse the effects of only some types of drugs, such as opioids. In 2023, the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) approved Naloxone for over-the-counter sales, making it available to purchase without a prescription. Having this medication on hand can save lives. Importantly, even if you are unsure of what type of substance someone is overdosing on, giving Naloxone will not do harm to the person.



SAVE A LIFE

Naloxone is a life-saving drug that can reverse an overdose from opioids- including heroin, fentanyl, and prescription opioid medications when given in time. Naloxone quickly reverses an overdose by blocking the effects of opioids. It can restore normal breathing within 2 to 3 minutes in a person whose breath has slowed or even stopped.

Naloxone is available in all 50 states.
In Alabama, you can obtain Naloxone at your local pharmacy without a prescription.

GET FREE NALOXONE



You can obtain Naloxone for free through the mail by watching a short [online video](#).

USING OPIOIDS FOR PAIN

Opioid drugs can reduce the sensation of physical pain and provide an increase in dopamine, but do not actively treat the cause of the pain.

Opioids, such as hydrocodone, oxycodone, fentanyl, or heroin block the pain receptors in the brain and other organs, so the pain is not registered. This can be helpful in short-term situations – reducing pain during the height of a situation can allow the medical team to address the problem and provide significant short-term relief for the patient through the worst of the pain. Medical practitioners have resources available to assist them in determining the appropriate type and dosage of pain-relieving medication for their patients.

Opioid Use Carries Many Risks

Any usage of opioids, however, carries significant risks that should be considered prior to being prescribed or taken. Many people experience nausea or constipation, sometimes severe, with opioid use. There is a heightened risk of overdose if opioids are combined with other drugs. If opioids are utilized without knowledge of what an individual has already consumed, whether that be something like alcohol, or regularly prescribed medications such as sleeping pills or anxiety medications, the outcome can be fatal. Opioids may cause low blood pressure, respiratory distress (lack of oxygen), drowsiness, or confusion. **Continued use of opioids carries a significant risk of opioid dependence or opioid use disorder, and even death.**

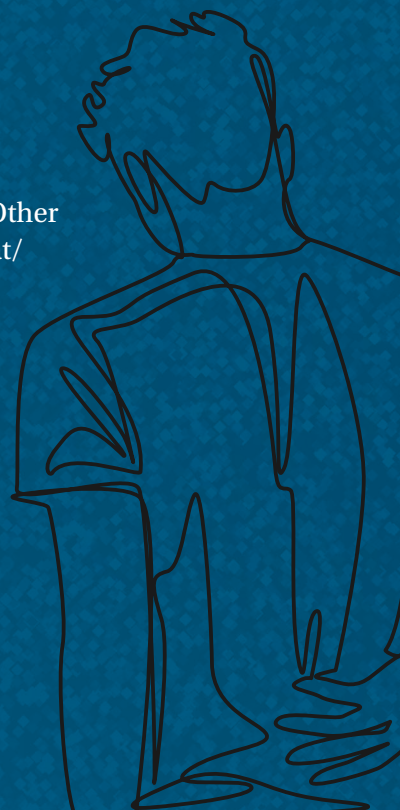
Opioids Should Not be Used to Treat Chronic Pain

The known risk of continual opioid use requires we consider alternatives for treating chronic pain. Chronic pain, or pain that lasts longer than three months, is typically not helped by opioids. While the drugs may help a person feel less pain for a brief period, the problem is not being treated, and will not be cured with ongoing opioid use. Rather, someone who continually takes opioids to treat chronic pain will more likely develop dependence, face withdrawal, and potentially substance use disorder. The amount of opioid required to reach the same level of pain relief will gradually increase, leaving fewer options for treatment of acute pain should other problems occur.

Alternatives for Treating Chronic Pain

Alternatives for the treatment of chronic pain include drug alternatives such as over the counter (OTC) medications including acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil), or naproxen (Aleve) or non-opioid prescription medications. Other treatment for chronic pain is physical conditioning through physical therapy, heat/cold therapy, exercise, stretching, massage, acupuncture, chiropractic care; and mental conditioning such as meditation and relaxation training, counseling, and cognitive behavioral therapy. Sleep and allowing one's body to rest can also be helpful in addressing chronic pain.

In some cases, an individual may benefit from a combination of opioid and non-opioid treatments. This should be thoroughly discussed with medical professionals to find the best option with the fewest risk for the individual. Opioids are not effective in treating all types of pain.



SUPPORTING RECOVERY

Recovery is a process of change through which people improve their health and wellness, live self-directed lives, and strive to reach their full potential. People in recovery benefit greatly from stability, which includes having steady work.

It may seem challenging to support employees who are in recovery, but doing so can provide a positive support system for them, as well as potentially save your business time and money on employee turnover and training. Understanding the recovery process, timelines, and the risks and benefits can help business owners and managers determine how to best support the recovery process.

STAGES OF RECOVERY

Below are the five stages someone in recovery from a substance use disorder or a mental health disorder progresses through to achieve a healthy life balance.

ACCEPTANCE	Individual acknowledges there are challenges that need to be addressed.
INSIGHT	Individual gains a deeper understanding of one's condition and underlying causes.
ACTION	Individual takes concrete steps to improve one's well-being.
HEALING	Individual experiences changes and is a time of growth, improvement, and rebuilding.
COMMITMENT	The final stage, is an ongoing process to maintain gains and commitment to continued self-care and growth.



For additional in-depth recovery information, check out the video series [“A Dose of Reality for Employers”](#) from the Ohio Chamber of Commerce.

While this series was developed for Ohio, much of the material is applicable beyond state borders.



Medication as a Treatment

There are several effective treatment options for substance use disorders and mental health crises that utilize medication, therapy, or a combination of both. Medication can help manage symptoms, while therapy supports coping mechanisms and long-term stability. Both forms of treatment can be instrumental in helping individuals regain their health and maintain productivity at work.

For substance use, treatment approaches referred to as Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT), use a variety of medications to help manage physical dependence and withdrawal symptoms associated with discontinued drug use. In this type of treatment, the medication is often paired with therapeutic counseling to improve the effectiveness and outcomes. In some cases, medications are used as standalone treatment for substance use disorders, this can be referred to as Medication for Addictions Treatment and both types of approaches may be referred to as MAT. For individuals with opioid or alcohol-related substance use disorders, MAT can play a crucial role in recovery. While not every person in recovery utilizes an MAT approach, it can be a key component for many individuals with an opioid and/or alcohol-related substance use disorder.

MAT CATEGORIES

MOUD: Medication for Opioid Use Disorder

MAUD: Medication for Alcohol Use Disorder

Similarly, individuals recovering from a mental health crisis may engage in different forms of treatment, such as psychotherapy, medication, or a combination of these. Psychotropic medications are commonly used in mental health treatment to address conditions like depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder. These medications work by influencing brain chemistry and are often most effective when combined with therapy, which helps individuals develop coping skills and work toward long-term stability. Psychotropic medications come in several types, including antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications, and antipsychotics, each with various options to allow for individualized treatment. Finding the right medication and dosage may take time, but, when combined with therapy, these medications can be highly effective in managing mental health symptoms.

Individuals recovering from either a mental health crisis or substance use disorder may need ongoing support to maintain stability. For some, this may mean continuing with medication, therapy, or a combination of these approaches. An individual utilizing medication as part of their treatment program can lead a healthy, productive life, including being able to work. These programs may require certain time allowances for treatment, which could potentially affect an employee's availability at times. However, it is important to recognize that these treatment approaches are protected by both the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) laws.

Supporting employees in recovery involves creating an empathetic and flexible environment that respects their treatment needs. While treatment commitments may occasionally affect an employee's availability, recognizing the importance of these programs can help employees regain health and productivity, benefiting both the individual and the organization as a whole. An employer can implement policies to protect both the employee and the employer. This will be discussed in more detail in the Creating a Positive Workplace section.

COMBATTING STIGMA

Behavioral health stigma in the workplace can have an impact on an individual's self-esteem and overall mental health. Individuals may also feel isolated or rejected by their colleagues and not feel comfortable discussing any issues they may be experiencing.

STIGMA DEFINED

Stigma is a set of negative beliefs a group or society holds about a topic or group of people. The World Health Organization has classified stigma as having a detrimental effect on the treatment of individuals and is a huge barrier to recovery.

There are a number of simple steps we can take as individuals and in specific settings, like a workplace, to combat stigma surrounding mental health and substance use disorders. The greater number of these tools we put in place, the more positive impact we will see.

Use Person-First Language

Everyday language use often removes a person's identity in favor of some aspect of their life. This is referred to as identify-first language; it defines an individual by a condition they are experiencing. For instance, the term 'cancer patient' puts an undue emphasis on the fact an individual has some form of cancer, rather than on their existence as a living, breathing person experiencing any number of positive and negative life events. Person-first language encourages us to always put the person before the problem. Phrases like "living with" can assist us in doing this with just minor changes to our speech patterns. "He is living with cancer" keeps the person—he—centered, rather than the diagnosis. It is a good idea to practice this change in our speech so that it becomes our new standard.

Co-opted language also creates problems. We often see terminology that began in the mental health arena turned into everyday words. This leads to misunderstanding of what certain terms mean, and makes them feel like everyday problems, rather than the significant issues they may truly be.

EXAMPLES OF USING PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE

IDENTITY FIRST: **DISCOURAGED**

John has been homeless for a year.

Margaret is a drug addict.

Mary is a schizophrenic.

Anna relapsed.

Mark is crazy.

Sheila gave birth to a crack baby.

PERSON FIRST: **ENCOURAGED**

John is currently unhoused.

Margaret is living with a substance use disorder.

Mary is living with schizophrenia.

Anna is experiencing a recurrence of symptoms.

Mark is experiencing a mental health crisis.

Sheila's child experienced prenatal drug exposure.

Recognize Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder as Treatable Conditions

Our workplaces provide more than just a paycheck—they are environments for learning, growth, and personal development, much of which takes place directly within our work setting. Reducing stigma begins with the organization openly acknowledging mental health and substance use disorders as treatable medical conditions. These issues, whether stemming from medical causes or external circumstances, deserve understanding and support. By embedding this perspective into company values, and offering training as part of ongoing professional development, organizations can foster a culture of empathy and inclusion. This culture helps reduce stigma, regardless of whether employees are currently or unknowingly living with mental health or substance use disorders. A workplace that encourages employees to address their own biases and adopt person-first, inclusive language opens the door for those in need to seek assistance without fear of judgment. Strong, visible support from organizational leaders on this topic can positively shape the entire work environment, helping shift attitudes among employees—from those who may hold stigmatizing beliefs to those who may need encouragement and support to seek help.

Stigma is pervasive; we need numerous routes of addressing it to change attitudes and beliefs at a comprehensive level. The efforts you put in to addressing stigma in your workplace will become a part of a greater movement to benefit those living with substance use disorders and mental health challenges, and those in their lives trying to support them.



Visit VitAL's [resources](#) to learn more about stigma and how we can address it.

EVALUATING THE WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT

The first important action that can be taken to addressing mental health and substance misuse in the workplace is evaluating the current workplace environment. Evaluating a workplace or business regarding mental health and substance misuse is important in fostering a healthy, productive, and supportive environment for workers. The well-being of employees directly influences their performance, engagement, and overall satisfaction. By conducting an initial assessment, organizations can identify potential stressors, triggers, or shortcomings that might negatively impact employee's mental health and/or encourage substance misuse. This proactive approach allows for employers to identify what kind of interventions, policies, and resources are needed to improve the health of workers.

Important components of mental health/substance misuse evaluations in the workplace:

- Assessments should take place regularly to identify changes.
- Assessments should take place at all levels, including management and lower-level employees.
- Employees should have the opportunity to provide information anonymously so they can answer honestly without fear of repercussions.
- Concepts that should be evaluated include: the mental health of current employees, substance misuse of current employees, the employee's perception of their co-workers and the workplace environment, an assessment of the workplace environment including available resources, and an evaluation of current policies and procedures.
- Employers should have comprehensive policies in place to ensure any disclosures are made only to the necessary entities, and that information is kept confidential. Is there a protocol in place for any ADA or FMLA related requests to be processed to ensure confidentiality for the employee.
- Are current laws being observed and considered, substance use disorder is a medical condition, and has protections provided similar to other medical conditions. If an employee is not actively using but is in recovery, the employer must meet the requirements outlined by the ADA, HIPAA, and Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA). There may be some variation in the specific requirements due to the nature of the work performed, so it is important to understand the laws as they apply to your specific business, and the position held/type of work performed by any individual.

THE 4 "A'S" OF MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE MISUSE

The 4 'A's' of mental health and substance misuse in the workplace provide a baseline for evaluating the current workplace environment.

☐ **AWARENESS:**

Do employees, including management and supervisors, understand basic mental health and substance misuse concepts?

☐ **ACCOMMODATION:**

Are there procedures in place for individuals who struggle with mental health issues or substance misuse?

☐ **ASSISTANCE:**

What does the company do to support employees' mental health and/or substance misuse challenges?

☐ **ACCESS:**

Are there resources easily available to employees?

[> SEE THE FULL CHECKLIST](#)

It can be hard to know what to evaluate when planning your assessment. This toolkit provides a few potential assessments employers can use when evaluating their workplace. Not all of these assessments are required or useful for every workplace, so choose the ones you think fit your workplace best.

OTHER RESOURCES HELPFUL TO CREATE A HEALTHY WORKPLACE:

> PSYCHOSOCIAL RISK ASSESSMENT

The Mentally Healthy Workplace Toolkit

> PROCEDURES FOR CONDUCTING A FOCUS GROUP WITH EMPLOYEES

The Mentally Healthy Workplace Toolkit

> REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR THE SURGEON GENERAL'S FRAMEWORK FOR WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING

The U.S. Surgeon General

> SURVEY THAT MEASURES WORKPLACE MANAGEMENT AND STRESS, WORKPLACE CULTURE, MENTAL HEALTH AND ILLNESS IN THE WORKPLACE, MANAGERIAL SUPPORT, ORGANIZATIONAL INVESTMENT, AND EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT

Mental Health America

For additional resources to assist employers, including a sample policy that is supportive of employees and employers, please visit vitalalabama.com



CREATING A POSITIVE WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT

Material described in the upcoming section of the toolkit can be implemented to improve the overall well-being of a workplace. Each of these tools have been shown by research to reduce stress, improve positive mental health, and/or improve well-being of employees in a business setting. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list nor is it a prescription for every workplace. Some of these steps would not be possible in every workplace. For example, there are some jobs that are inherently high stress positions, and this high level of stress can only be mitigated to a certain degree. However, the possibility of taking other steps can improve overall mental health and reduce substance misuse, even if stress is high. While using this toolkit, utilize the possible interventions that would be useful, appropriate, and effective in your workplace based on your evaluations.

Build Awareness

One of the simplest steps you can take in the workplace, regardless of your position, is to increase awareness around mental health and substance misuse and work towards reducing stigma. Many people have limited knowledge about mental health or substance misuse, when to seek help, and/or where to turn for available resources. Taking some of these steps can improve that knowledge:

- Be a model for others by having conversations around mental health and substance misuse, making it less of a taboo subject.
- Organize trainings or other opportunities to become educated about mental health and substance misuse.
- Provide materials such as brochures, flyers, infographics, or articles related to mental health or substance misuse to help provide educational opportunities.
- Post information about mental health and substance misuse resources in the community in a visible, yet private place so employees know where to seek help, if needed.
- Continue to reinforce the importance of mental health and healthy behaviors in company-wide communication like newsletters and memos.
- Make supervisors aware that some employees may be justice involved, and may require the use of electronic monitoring devices, be required to submit to drug testing at randomly assigned dates and times, or have travel restrictions.
- Make education on mental health and substance misuse part of the new hire orientation process.



Find [resources](#) you can use on VitAL's website.

Create a Positive Environment

Since full-time employees spend so much time at their place of business, making that place an enjoyable, welcoming, and positive environment goes a long way towards building positive mental health and reducing the risk for substance misuse among employees.

- Encourage collaboration and when appropriate, allow employees a voice in important decisions affecting their work environment.
- Encourage shared participation in performance evaluations.
- Provide locations such as break rooms that are quiet and relaxing for employees to utilize.
- Make compensation transparent and competitive with similar jobs.
- Diversify the workforce to promote inclusion and acceptance of differing viewpoints.
- Help employees feel like what they do at work matters.

Foster Positive Workplace Interactions

One of the most important parts of the workplace culture is the relationships that build between employees. Having supportive co-workers can make work more enjoyable and mitigate the effects of potential negatives like stress. Some ways to foster these relationships include:

- Acknowledge employee achievements and contributions.
- Leaders, managers, and supervisors should try modeling positive interactions with co-workers.
- Take a zero-tolerance approach to bullying, harassment, or discrimination. If these behaviors occur ensure they are immediately and properly addressed.
- Encourage mentorship relationships, especially for new employees.
- Hold events or structured time for relationship building amongst employees.

Educate Leadership

Leaders, managers, and supervisors set the tone for all other employees in an organization. Make sure leadership is on board with improving mental health and reducing substance misuse among their employees. Participation of leadership in this effort is essential for the effectiveness of any intervention. Effective managers should: be respectful and responsible, communicate effectively, balance managing the needs of individuals and teams, and be able to manage difficult situations. Hiring and promoting individuals who embody these abilities is important to ensuring a positive experience for their employees. It is also important to teach leadership to model positive mental health and healthy behaviors, the importance of mental health, and the legal obligations related to disability that are applicable.

Have Supportive Policies and Procedures

An important component of creating a more positive mental health environment is making sure the organization's policies and procedures reflect an understanding of the importance of mental health and healthy behaviors and provide a supportive structure that protects and enriches employees. Organizations should include these policies and procedures when onboarding new employees and make sure they are easily accessible to employees, so all employees are knowledgeable of these policies. Examples of policies and procedures that can help contribute to a positive work environment may include but are not limited to:

- Include psychological health in health and safety policies.
- Flexible work agreements, if possible.
- Incentivize healthy behaviors such as abstaining from substance misuse and drinking within the low-risk drinking limits.
- Adequate vacation time and policies around mental health days off.
- Positions or committees of employees devoted to managing and improving mental health and substance misuse policies and interventions.
- Have policies that support appropriate work and life balance, including paid family leave.
- Develop and publicize a policy to address employees who are justice involved, to include open communication as needed with supervision officers, schedule adjustments to accommodate MAT needs, or other justice system related absences as required.
- Keep in mind that all workplaces are different, and some policies may not be possible or practical for your specific organization.
- Employers should have a clear, thorough policy related to substance use, drug testing, the presence of MAT medications in urinalysis, and any other related concerns. These policies should be vetted by your legal counsel and applied consistently.

Manage Psychosocial and Substance Misuse Risks

All workplaces have the potential to have psychosocial risks that could negatively impact mental health and substance misuse. Some jobs are inherently high stress or cannot be flexible regarding hours or expectations. However, some psychosocial and substance misuse risks can be mitigated to best protect employees. Employers should work to identify potential risks, assess the magnitude of the risk, control the risk as best as possible, and review to make sure attempts to control risk are successful.

MANAGE PSYCHOSOCIAL AND SUBSTANCE MISUSE RISKS

POTENTIAL RISK	POSSIBLE SOLUTION
High/low job demand	When possible, managing job demands so individuals aren't asked to do too much (high stress) or too little (boredom or feeling undervalued).
Low job control	Providing instances when employees can be empowered to have influence over their own position or workplace decisions, so individuals feel a sense of control in their work environment.
Poor support	Encouraging supportive leadership and co-workers.
Low role clarity	Making sure each employee's role is clearly defined and employees feel like expectations are clear.
Workplace Conflict	Education about successful conflict management and effective interventions.
Bullying, discrimination, harassment, aggression, and/or abuse	Elimination of these behaviors in the workplace through clear policy and procedures and through appropriate management of any incidents.
Low reward recognition	Employees feeling rewarded or appreciated for the work they complete.
Lack of organizational justice recognition	Making sure employees feel like decisions made are 'fair' for everyone.
Traumatic events recognition	Appropriate safety measures and procedures that mitigate risk for traumatic events at the workplace. Or support for employees if traumatic events at work are inevitable (e.g., working in medical field).
Isolated work events recognition	Provide structured opportunities for positive interactions amongst employees.

Offer an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and Additional Resources

If employees do experience issues related to mental health or substance misuse, they need resources to help them recover and thrive. An organization having an EAP that includes mental health treatment and substance misuse resources provide employees with access to resources at work even if they don't know how to find resources on their own. Organizations should do their best to make sure employees are familiar with EAP and the different services available to them. The effectiveness of the EAP in providing support should be assessed to ensure employees feel adequately supported. In addition to having an EAP that includes mental healthcare treatment and substance misuse resources, additional resources that a workplace can provide include:

- Having a visible resource guide that contains mental health and substance misuse information and resources in your community.
- Offering support groups for individuals to socialize and discuss difficulties at work and/or elsewhere with each other.
- Offering support groups for employees to share mental health and substance misuse challenges.
- Providing access to self-assessments for employees to evaluate their own mental health or substance use risks.
- Offering screenings for employees to determine the need for potential services and/or referrals.
- Providing health insurance that covers mental healthcare and substance misuse treatment, as well as medical healthcare.

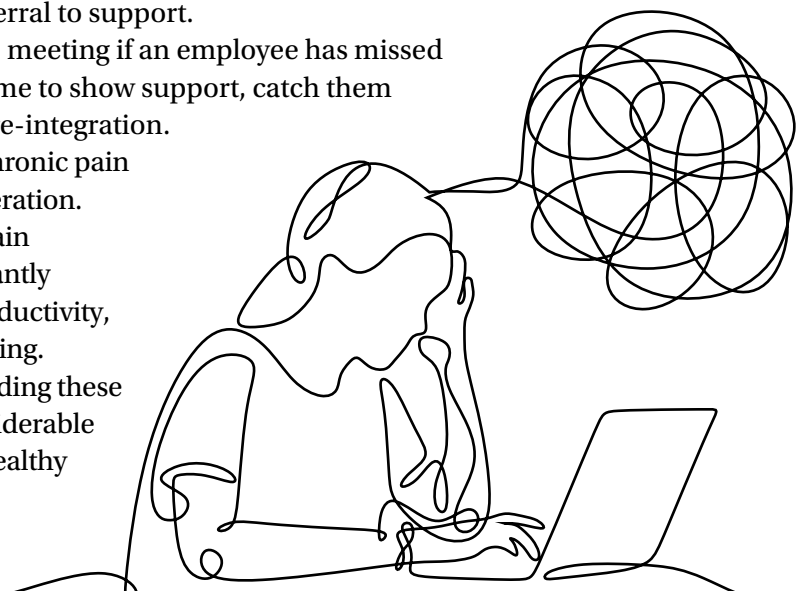


Find [resources](#) you can use on VitAL's website.

Support Employees Who are Struggling

Even if a workplace has a positive environment, employees may experience more severe issues related to mental health or substance misuse. Supporting employees who are struggling is imperative to their successful re-integration into the workplace. When an employee is struggling or has an absence from work related to mental health, substance misuse, or related justice involvement, employers can:

- Inform employees in recovery that they may have the right to reasonable accommodations and other protections that can help them keep their jobs.
- Make accommodations such as reduced workload, days off, changing role, and/or referral to support.
- Arrange a 'return to work' meeting if an employee has missed a significant amount of time to show support, catch them up, and create a plan for re-integration.
- Have a policy that takes chronic pain management into consideration. Opioid use and chronic pain management can significantly impact an employee's productivity, safety, and overall well-being. For employers, understanding these impacts can create a considerable difference in fostering a healthy and resilient workforce.



BEING A SUPPORTIVE CO-WORKER

While big systemic changes in an organization can create an environment that improves the overall mental health and reduces the risk of substance misuse among their employees, not everyone is in a position to enact large macro level change within a company. Additionally, even if a company has helpful policies, employees may still experience mental health and/or substance misuse difficulties for a variety of reasons outside of the company's control. However, there are still things you can do for a co-worker in these situations. The following section discusses how an individual can be a helpful co-worker by noticing the signs when someone is struggling, talking to them, and referring them to professionals, if needed.

Notice Signs

Often when someone is struggling with their mental health and/or substance misuse, they may not feel comfortable openly sharing it with others. They may feel as though they are a burden, or they shouldn't 'complain' about their problems to other people. Because of this, an important skill for individuals who seek to be helpful to their co-workers is the ability to recognize signs when someone is struggling. When a person takes notice of these signs and checks in with their co-worker, it shows they care and have their co-worker's best interests at heart. Here are some examples of signs you may see in the workplace that someone is struggling with their mental health and/or substance misuse:

- Difficulty concentrating or focusing on work tasks.
- Significant changes in energy level (excessive fatigue or uncharacteristically high levels of energy).
- Significant changes in eating, sleeping, personality, or other behaviors.
- Physiological problems unexplained by medical issues (e.g., stomach issues).
- Decrease in hygiene or grooming behaviors.
- Decrease in productivity or work quality.
- Changes in speech or motor functioning.
- Loss of interest in work or in things that the person typically enjoys.
- Significant weight gain or loss.

Talk to Them

Once you notice signs a person might be struggling, check in with them and see how they are doing. It is possible there is nothing going on and the signs you're noticing have an explanation that has nothing to do with their mental health and/or substance misuse but checking in and asking someone how they are doing shows you care, and that it is okay to talk about mental health and substance misuse. If the person is experiencing mental health issues it can sometimes be difficult to know what to say but here are some tips for talking to someone who is struggling with their mental health:

- Begin by explaining your concern, sharing specific times you've noticed a change or been concerned; discuss instead of telling them what you think.
- Ask open-ended questions (those that can't be answered as 'yes' or 'no') to learn more about their situation.
- Listen carefully and non-judgmentally.
- End the conversation by discussing the next steps; assist the person with identifying beneficial resources.
- Demonstrate you care more about them as a person than their output, productivity, etc. by focusing on the individual, rather than just their position within your organization.



[Watch this short video](#) for an overview of how to approach someone about a potential mental health challenge.

- Focus on listening and understanding what's going on from their point of view. Remember what they are experiencing may not make sense to you, but it is very real for them.
- Don't rush to problem solving. If they ask for suggestions or information, you can provide it, but make sure you focus on understanding and listening first. Also, it is not your responsibility to diagnose them or try to treat them. There are professionals that can do that.
- Avoid making promises you can't keep (e.g., 'you'll feel better tomorrow,' 'anything you need, just let me know').
- Keep focus on them and avoid talking about yourself or your experiences. Remember just because you are doing well or overcame a situation doesn't mean what works for you will work for them.

Refer to Professionals

If the problems an individual is experiencing are interfering with their ability to function at work, their life at home, their relationships, or in other parts of their daily life and does not improve without intervention, it may be helpful to refer them to professionals who can help them. When providing this referral, simply provide them options and don't pressure them to seek help as this may make it less likely for them to take action.

There are a number of different kinds of professionals that can be helpful, and you can use the [Connect Alabama App](#) from VitAL to help find the right professional for the situation.



FIND THE RIGHT PROFESSIONAL

Download the [Connect Alabama App](#).

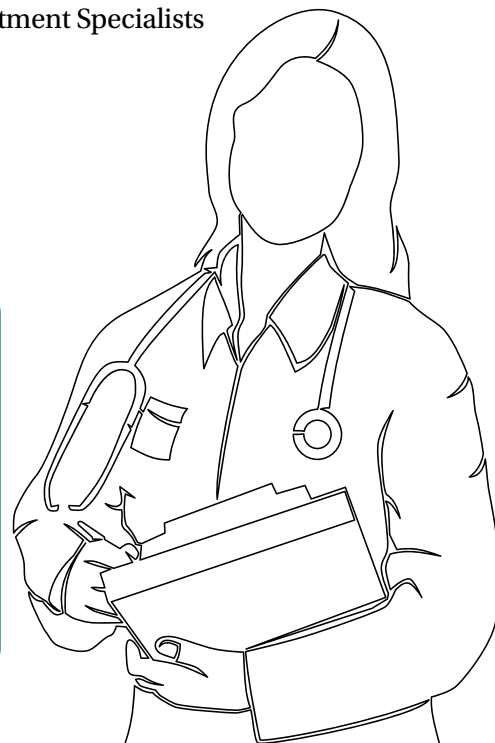
Here are some professionals and centers that could be helpful for referral:

- Primary Care Physicians & Psychiatrists
- Psychologists
- Counselors
- Therapists
- Social Workers
- In-Patient and Out-Patient Substance Use Treatment Specialists
- Detoxification Centers
- Rehabilitation Centers
- Certified Peer Specialists
- Crisis Management Specialists

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A variety of resources related to mental health, substance use and misuse, stigma, and employment laws are available from VitAL.

SEE ALL RESOURCES



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