

Substance Abuse: Helping Without Getting Overwhelmed

Rick reacted well when you had a serious talk about your concerns that his drinking was getting in the way of his work. You felt good about the relaxed but firm attitude you projected and he agreed to think seriously about how to crank up his production.

Two weeks later you realize that he hasn't gotten back to you and he is keeping himself out of your way, really almost out of sight. So you need to dive back in and this time you are ready to insist he get checked out.

You email him an invitation to meet this Thursday after work and he agrees. When he comes in he looks pasty, but asks about your family in a big warm way. You stay the course and when you tell him you're disappointed he didn't check in as he promised; he slumps in his chair and says, "You're right; I didn't."

Intervening in a drinking problem isn't a one-shot deal. Alcohol abuse and alcoholism is mired in denial, not only on the drinker's part. Supervisors, managers, colleagues, parents—we unwittingly conspire and minimize, then we get to keep avoiding so we don't have to take this problem on.

Resolving this will most likely take some time and a lot of holding your ground. This is rarely pleasant, but here are some hints to help keep yourself centered and not overwhelmed.

- You can't rescue someone who is drinking too much. You can assist them if they want to try to stop, but it is truly their issue. You can't rescue their family or colleagues either. You can be a voice of compassion and a resource for ideas and strategies, but attempting to be a rescuer is a zero-sum game. You will lose your patience, your compassion and still won't "save" them.
- Finding a way to stop drinking, let alone maintain sobriety, is rarely a quick process. Unfortunately, insurance companies tend to pay only for a drying out period of a week or less. Most programs that have higher success rates encourage stays of a month or more.
- Depending upon the situation, workloads may need to be reduced for awhile once the person returns. Often it's advisable to limit travel (and client dinners) initially.
- Bring in an HR specialist to discuss your obligations and successful approaches. Other practices have been through this before and you don't need to start at step one.
- Be wary of waiting to see if the problem goes away or resolves itself in some magical way. Alcohol or other drug abuse is an issue that is most efficiently handled in a straight forward manner and at the earliest sign of a problem.

- If you try to handle your work and the impaired person's work, as well as be the point person for taking care of everyone, you are almost certain to get overwhelmed, resentful, or burned out. Dealing with a substance abuse problem is a marathon event for the individual, for the practice and for you – take care of yourself and get the assistance you need.

P.S. Much of what was said about colleagues can apply to clients, as well.



Szifra Birke is a certified and experienced Drug and Alcohol Counselor who has advised drinker's colleagues on the ins and outs of alcohol addiction and problem drinking. If you need skilled veteran to advise you, give her a call.