



## GUIDE

### Starting a dialogue on alcohol, drug and medicine use or abuse and addiction in the workplace

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**This guide is intended for supervisors and staff, and contains tools to facilitate an open dialogue on alcohol, drug and medication use (or abuse)<sup>1</sup> or addiction<sup>2</sup> with staff members or colleagues.**

People are often reluctant to discuss alcohol, drug and medication abuse or addiction issues because they are ashamed or afraid of the consequences. It is important to supervise and treat employees as effectively as possible in the earliest stages. The sooner the problems are addressed, the better the chances of recovery and the lower the risk of health problems.

Co-workers can also play an important role in identifying problems at an early stage. Creating a healthy and socially safe working and learning environment where problematic alcohol, drug and medication use and addiction can be discussed is crucial in overcoming the associated stigma. This will embolden employees to speak up and seek help more quickly.

The use of alcohol, drugs and medication before, during and after working hours can have a major impact on the safety and health of employees.

**As a supervisor, what should I do if I suspect that an employee is intoxicated at work or is struggling with alcohol, drug or medication abuse issues or addiction?**

#### Identifying Problems

If you notice any signs in an employee such as staggering, alcohol on the breath, or slurring of words, and you suspect they are drunk whilst working, instantly get them to lay down working. Only a manager has the authority to do so. Next, describe the behaviour you observed and ask them to explain your observation. Please note that, by law, you are not allowed to have employees tested for alcohol or drug use. Open up a dialogue with the employee if you see any signals that point to structural alcohol, drug or medication use issues. These include: showing up late on a regular basis, self-neglect, changes in behaviour, emotions or interests and poor work performance. Express your concern. Make sure you only address any observed changes in their behaviour and do not ask the employee to diagnose the problem. This should be left to doctors, who are best qualified to diagnose whether someone has a substance use disorder, behavioural addiction or illness.

#### Support

In the event of proven or potential alcohol, drug or medication abuse or addiction, **the personnel adviser, occupational social worker and/or occupational physician<sup>3</sup>** can offer you advice and help you support the employee. If necessary, temporarily adjust the employee's tasks.

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<sup>1</sup> Medication use includes the use of medications that have not been prescribed by a doctor or other qualified professional, or cases where the prescribed or recommended maximum dosages are not being observed and the user's judgement and alertness are being affected.

<sup>2</sup> The term addiction refers to substance use disorders and behavioural addictions. Behavioural addictions include gambling, gaming and sex addiction.

<sup>3</sup> The distribution of roles and tasks is consistent with current absenteeism and rehabilitation support arrangements.



- 1 Medication use includes the use of medications that have not been prescribed by a doctor or other qualified professional, or cases where the prescribed or recommended maximum dosages are not being observed and the user's judgement and alertness are being affected.
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Work can provide a form of protection as it adds structure to the day. With this in mind, we recommend that you initially try to keep the employee working (but make sure they do so in a safe manner). Stay in regular contact with the employee and monitor their well-being. The occupational physician is not allowed to share medical data unless the employee grants permission to do so.

### **Treatment**

Give the employee the opportunity to undergo treatment, during working hours if necessary. Do not ask the staff member about the nature of the treatment. The employee, social worker and occupational physician are also not required to provide any information on this subject.

### **Returning to work**

Make sure to remain involved and interested in the employee's well-being, also during the reintegration process. Adjust the work environment where necessary to reduce the risk of relapse, for example by not serving alcohol at work parties.

### **Conversation guideline | I suspect that an employee is intoxicated at work**

You should always take action if you suspect that an employee is intoxicated at work. Especially if this could jeopardise the safety of the employee in question, their colleagues or the continuity of the organisation.

#### **Start a dialogue with the employee.**

- Let them know that you are concerned about their performance and health.
- Inform the employee about the signals and/or conduct you observed.

#### **Be prepared for various scenarios. The employee may respond in several ways.**

- They may tell you that your assumptions are wrong or that there is another explanation for their behaviour. Repeat what you have observed and let them know that you are worried. Keep in mind that there may be another explanation for their behaviour.
- If the employee confirms your suspicions, you can immediately proceed to the next step.

Let the employee know that they will have to stop working (temporarily). If you are unable to discuss the issue any further because the employee is currently intoxicated, make an appointment to do so on the next working day. Give the employee the opportunity to recover at home. If necessary, arrange transportation home.

**Follow up on the incident.**

- Contact the employee (by phone or otherwise) on the next working day to find out how they are doing.
- Insist that the employee contact their GP, [the occupational physician and the social worker](#) to get help.
- Make a follow-up appointment with the employee at the earliest possible opportunity to discuss their return to work.
- Make agreements on improving their performance.

**Conversation guideline | I suspect that a staff member is struggling with alcohol, drug or medication abuse issues or addiction**

If you suspect that a staff member is struggling with substance abuse issues or addiction, try to discuss this with them as soon as possible. Opening a dialogue will demonstrate your concern for the employee and potentially contribute to their recovery while ensuring a safer working environment. It is best to take action immediately, even if you 'only' suspect a problem. There's no need to wait until the situation gets out of hand.

**Prepare thoroughly**

- Summarise the signals and behaviour you observed, using objective and concrete wording.
- Make an appointment with the employee to discuss your suspicions.
- Keep in mind that people often don't acknowledge that they need help or actually seek help until they have received several signals from their environment or have discussed the situation on multiple occasions.

**Start a dialogue with the employee.**

- Start the conversation by explaining that you are concerned and describing the facts and behaviours you observed.
- If the employee indicates that they do not want to discuss this now, make an appointment to revisit the subject at another time.

Allow the employee to express their emotions. The employee may deny the problem, become angry or have some other emotional response during the interview. Keep calm and maintain an appropriate distance.

**Be prepared for various scenarios. The employee may respond in several ways.**

- The employee might deny the suspicions. This denial may focus on the facts: the employee indicates that the suspicions are unwarranted. The denial may also involve an attempt to find excuses.
- The employee confirms that the suspicions are justified. Insist that the employee contact their GP, [the occupational physician and the social worker](#) to discuss their problems and get help.

**Follow up on the incident.**

Discuss subsequent steps with the employee, such as making a new appointment or follow-up appointment with the GP, occupational physician or occupational social worker. Discuss how you will record your agreements and give each other confidential feedback.

Measures in the event that the employee refuses to acknowledge the problem or fails to cooperate with rehabilitation efforts

The mere fact that someone has been diagnosed with a substance abuse disorder or behavioural addiction by a doctor does not constitute grounds for any measures under Dutch employment law, as this is regarded as an illness. However, such measures may be justified if they fail to comply with regulations or agreements, fail to acknowledge the problem or fail to cooperate with rehabilitation efforts. This could take the form of an official warning, a wage freeze, suspension, removal from active duty, a performance review or dismissal. The appropriate measure will depend on the circumstances. This process will involve the employee, the personnel adviser and the supervisor.

What should I do if I suspect that my co-worker is intoxicated at work or is struggling with alcohol, drug or medication abuse issues or addiction?

Conversation Guideline

### **Intoxication in the workplace**

- You should always take action if you suspect that one of your co-workers is intoxicated at work. Especially if this could jeopardise their own safety, that of their colleagues or the continuity of the organisation.
- You can always start by discussing the issue with your colleague (take them to a safe place first if necessary). Alternatively, you can warn their supervisor.

### **Suspicion of substance abuse or addiction**

- If you suspect that your co-worker is struggling with alcohol, drug or addiction problems, try to discuss this with them. You can start the conversation by telling them you are worried and asking if it would be alright to discuss the situation together.
- Substance abuse and addiction are still taboo subjects, so be mindful of the words you use to describe the situation.
- Figure out the best follow-up steps together.

One conversation generally won't solve the problem. However, it could give your co-worker the sense that they are being listened to and motivate them to take action.

### **Got a question?**

You can put any questions you may have to staff at the Alcohol Information Hotline. You can also email or chat if you would rather not call by phone. Information Hotline staff are ready to take your call on working days from 09:00 to 17:00.

### **Sources**

- [‘Guide on the early detection of alcohol abuse issues in the workplace for employees, employers and occupational physicians’](#) published by Samenwerkingsverband Vroegsignalering Alcoholproblematiek
- KNMG [‘Working in the healthcare sector: substance abuse and addiction’](#) policy plan
- NVHB [‘Occupational physicians' duties and responsibilities in relation to organisational alcohol, drug and medical policies’](#) guideline
- Trimbos ‘Alcohol, drug and medication policy’ guidelines