

When a Colleague is Abusing Drugs

By Mary Mitchell

Most of us, at some point, will work with someone who is using illegal drugs. The numbers are scary. Seventy percent of drug users are employed full-time and, in a recent survey, almost eight percent of full-time workers reported current drug use.

"Drug users keep their habit under cover at work because it's illegal and likely to get them fired," says Todd Whitmer, senior executive officers of the Caron Foundation. "So if you notice it, there's a good chance he's been using for a while, and the addiction is pretty serious."

Suggestions on Getting Someone Into Treatment

So what do you say and do when you know a co-worker is using drugs? Whitmer advises taking steps to get the person into treatment, and has these suggestions:

- **If safety is at stake, intervene.** Do what is necessary to keep the person or others from harm. Take him or her to the emergency room; call the police; take the car keys.
- **Do not lie, make excuses, or try to cover up your friend's behavior.** You need not say, "Jane is not in the meeting because she's snorting cocaine in the bathroom." You could say, "I'm not sure what's going on; I assumed Jane was coming to the meeting."
- **Do not attempt to talk to colleagues about drug use while they are high.** Wait until they are coherent. Avoid accusations; be honest about your concerns without shaming or moralizing.
Try something like, "I was really in a bad spot when they asked me why you missed the meeting. I am worried about what's happening to you. I would like you to get help. But I am not going to cover up for you if you're missing meetings, and I will not make excuses for you to others."
- **Get help.** Contact your employee assistance program. It provides assistance not only to employees but also to family members and others in the employee's life. If there is no program, call an addiction treatment center.
- **If your colleague refuses help, you can collaborate with friends and family** to confront the addict with his or her problem. Addiction treatment centers can connect you with a professional who can plan and guide a process called intervention.