



BENEFITS

# Substance Abuse Got Worse Amid the Pandemic and Remote Work

Use of recreational drugs is common during the remote workday

By Lin Gensing-Pophal December 17, 2021



When COVID-19 emerged in early 2020, millions of employees suddenly found themselves working from home—and many will likely continue to do so for the

foreseeable future. It's a situation that benefits many but has a dangerous potential downside for others.

Amid the pandemic, mental health and substance use disorders have worsened, in some cases significantly. Of particular concern is the rising rate of opioid addiction and related deaths.

## A Rising Problem

Subscription drug addiction isn't new, but synthetic substances such as fentanyl have compounded the situation, said Pam Nabors, president and CEO of staffing agency CareerSource Central Florida, which has partnered with the Department of Labor to help HR professionals handle employees' addiction issues.

Nabors saw a spike of overdose deaths due to synthetic fentanyl starting in 2019. "It's a powerful and scary drug," she said. "Even a tiny amount can be fatal."

High unemployment coupled with an increase in remote work at the height of the pandemic created a condition in which services were scarce or workers didn't know how to access them.

Between April 2020 and April 2021, fatalities related to substance abuse reached a 12-month all-time high—100,000 people—according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The addiction issue is also impacting the ability of employers to hire and retain workers. Even when an employee is not the addicted party, the addiction of a family member can wear on the employee's productivity.

## Startling Statistics

According to the [National Safety Council](#), 75 percent of employers have been directly impacted by workers who take opioids, but only 17 percent feel well-prepared to handle the situation.

Perhaps more startling are data on how—and when—employees are using substances.

Addiction treatment center Sierra Tucson's [Self-Medication Nation survey](#) of 1,011 employees throughout the U.S. revealed that:

- **One-quarter of respondents** had participated in a Zoom or Microsoft Teams work call while under the influence of marijuana, alcohol or other recreational drugs.

- **One in 5** admitted they've used alcohol, marijuana or other drugs while employed remotely this year; 73 percent of those said that if their employer insists they return to the office, they will miss the opportunity to use marijuana and other drugs during the workday.
- **More than one-quarter** said an added benefit of working from home is the opportunity to use alcohol and other drugs during the workday.

These are chilling numbers that point to a critical need for education, awareness, communication and intervention.

## Helping Employers Help Employees

Employers and HR professionals are key to addressing the opioid crisis that's affecting the workplace, CareerSource Central Florida believes. It recently launched [Fostering Opioid Recovery through Training & Employment \(FORTE\)](#), a four-year initiative focused on engaging businesses and individuals affected by the opioid crisis.

The staffing agency is also working with the [Greater Orlando Society for Human Resource Management \(GOSHRM\)](#) to bring HR professionals together to discuss the best ways to tackle the crisis through the workplace, such as by raising awareness, reducing the stigma that prevents employees from seeking help, and offering assistance to employees who may be experiencing addiction or caring for others who are.

["COVID-19 has exacerbated the problem and greatly impacted those in the workforce,](#) including front-line and remote workers," Cheryl Brown Merriwether, president of GOSHRM and vice president and executive director for the Orlando-based International Center for Addiction and Recovery Education (ICARE), recently told *Orlando Medical News*. "HR professionals are paying close attention to employee benefits that include services to identify and address the problem of workplace addiction."

She described employee assistance programs (EAPs) as "a great resource for employees to access various treatment options, including counselors, therapists and professional recovery coaches, all designed to help employees make healthier choices."

*[SHRM members-only toolkit: [Employing and Managing People with Addictions](#)]*

## Many Fail to Seek Help

Employees often won't ask for help because there is a lingering stigma around substance use disorders, according to Brad Sorte, president and CEO of Caron Treatment Centers, which has facilities in multiple states. "It's not like a medical issue in

which a worker wouldn't hesitate to submit Family and Medical Leave Act papers" to allow them to take time off to get help, he said. "There is a different feeling about mental health and substance use disorders. Employees may wonder if there will be retaliatory action or whether they will be viewed differently or as unfit, so they internalize those feelings of guilt, shame and feeling embarrassed."

Not admitting they have a problem, Sorte said, is "the No. 1 reason for not seeking help." They feel it's something they can manage on their own, he noted, but "it's a dangerous path to take to manage it yourself."

HR professionals, along with line managers and supervisors, can play an important role in establishing a culture and climate where employees are more likely to seek the help they need, Sorte said.

## Lines of Communication

"Any extra support you, as an employer, can provide to help people get through difficult times will only boost employee loyalty and productivity," said Dr. Yusuf Sherwani, CEO and co-founder of Quit Genius, a digital clinic that has virtual medication-assisted treatment programs for multiple addictions. He offered the following suggestions for how to do this:

- **Provide emotional support** and encourage employees to be proactive in seeking the support they need. Assure them that you're there to help in any way you can.
- **Remind staff** of the availability of mental health benefits—not just once, but periodically throughout the year.
- **Keep** lines of communication open.
- **Support** healthy habits.

"Your employees need to know that they can reach out in confidence, and without judgment, if they're struggling to keep their resolutions and find themselves in need of professional or peer support, Sherwani said. "Let them know that they are not alone, and that stress, depression and addiction issues are intense for many people right now. Talking about it can help, and sometimes just communicating about what they're going through can be a source of healing."

He added that HR having an open-door policy or virtual office hours "can help identify employees who are struggling and need to be connected with deeper resources."

Employers, managers and HR teams can—and should—check in frequently with employees who are working remotely. This can be particularly important for those experiencing pain and potentially misusing opioids, Sherwani advised.

The best investment employers can make is in their people, Sorte stressed. Companies that can afford to do so, he said, should invest in technologies and platforms that allow employees to seek help privately, such as [Ginger](#) or [Lyra](#). They represent options, separate from the workplace, that provide privacy and protection through the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act.

January is a time when "it's common for people to make substance-related resolutions, especially after the difficult year many have had," Sherwani said. "While they probably aren't coming into work and announcing their resolutions, there are ways employers can help support them."

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**Related SHRM Articles:**

[The COVID-19 Crisis Has Brought Substance Abuse to Light](#), *All Things Work*, October 2021

[Employers Respond to Rising Substance Abuse with Treatment, Support](#), *SHRM Online*, March 2021