

Reading the signs:

Stepping in when a colleague needs help

As adults in the workplace, we usually strive to respect our coworkers' privacy and autonomy. But it's important to understand the difference between being nosy and being responsive. The taboos that accompany mental illness, substance abuse and interpersonal problems can make it difficult for workers to seek help when they need it. By reacting sensitively and early to concerns about coworkers, not only can we help overcome taboos, but we can also help them access assistance earlier and avoid practice problems.

What are the signs that a colleague is struggling? Here's a non-exhaustive list:

- New pattern of lateness, absences, including unexcused absences
- Suddenly working longer hours than usual or having very high energy, unusual talkativeness
- Personality changes
- Missing meetings
- Forgetting assigned tasks
- Decreased productivity or problems with work quality
- Client complaints about the colleague/employee
- Complaints from the person's colleagues
- Newly disorganized workspace or decline in personal grooming or hygiene
- Bruises, broken bones or other possible signs of domestic violence
- Lying/making excuses
- Unwillingness to delegate work, collaborate or accept assistance
- Excessive or inappropriate delegation



What should I do?



Don't delay: once signs are evident, the employee may be seriously troubled; and it can be less intrusive to offer help casually, when symptoms are mild, than to wait until the problem is severe



Persevere: if the colleague says he or she is okay, offer help again when you observe new signs. It can take several offers of help before a person takes action



Ask in private: avoid embarrassing the person and maximize the chance he or she will confide in you by offering help in private



Offer resources, not advice: if you're not trained to deliver mental health services, stick with suggesting resources or offering practical help, like time off to visit a counselor, or cab fare to an appointment



Focus on performance, not character: if you are the struggling worker's supervisor, be sure to offer empathy; but express criticisms in terms of problems with work performance, not the person's character



Don't enable: while empathy is in order, don't make excuses for your colleague or excuse behaviour you wouldn't tolerate from others



Learn about the issue: make an effort to educate yourself about the particular problem your colleague is facing, so that you can avoid perpetuating stereotypes about mental illness, substance abuse, or other problems

When you're responsible for a struggling colleague's work

Being legally responsible for a colleague's work, either through an employment relationship or via partnership, adds an extra wrinkle to the decision about when to intervene. Lawyers who supervise the work of others may ultimately be responsible for claims that result from juniors' errors and omissions, and partners may in some cases be liable for the negligence of their partners.

Where you have a duty to ensure that another person's work is competently done, it's essential to take timely steps to determine whether health problems are affecting that person's performance, and to correct the problem, either by offering additional support, redistributing client files to other lawyers, or taking on tasks personally that you would otherwise delegate. When you know a colleague is struggling, it's prudent to check in regularly to ensure he or she is coping with the workload, and to develop a contingency plan should the lawyer or staff member require time out of the office to recover.

Helpful resources:

"Helping a Troubled Employee" from Homewood Health, provided by the MAP: homewoodhealth.com

From Mental Health Works, a national initiative of the Canadian Mental Health Association "When an employee has an addiction problem": mentalhealthworks.ca/employers/faqs/addiction-problem

"Check up from the neck up": visit mooodisorders.ca and see especially, fact sheets about mood disorders and lists of signs and symptoms.

Canadian problem gambling resource site "Know Your Limit": knowyourlimit.ca/?page_id=190