

Frontline Supervisor



This information is provided by Continuum EAP. If you would like more information on these or other topics, please don't hesitate to contact us.

1135 M Street, Suite 400, Lincoln, NE, 68508 402-476-0186 or 800-755-7636

Fax: 402-476-2757 Email: EAspecialist@4Continuum.com www.4Continuum.com



When Illness & Death Enter the Workplace

Serious illness and death can shock us in the workplace. It affects employee productivity and alters workplace dynamics. Employees, dealing with their own anxieties about death and dying, wonder how to respond.

This can also be a very difficult time for a supervisor or manager. You want to do the “right thing” but at the same time aren't sure exactly what that is. Remember to consider Continuum EAP if you are faced with an employee death or diagnosis of a terminal illness. We can consult with you, examine options for an EAP response, and help determine what services might be beneficial.

■ **I am a new supervisor, and employees have begun coming to me with their need to talk about emotional work issues. They require a good listener. The issues include concerns about downsizing, performance, coworker conflicts, angry customers, and more. How can I be a good listener?**

The “**active listening model**” will help you demonstrate empathy with your employees in job-related discussions. Start by inviting an employee to sit down in your office. Make the person comfortable, and demonstrate that you are glad he or she came by to talk. Let the employee talk about the issues or concerns. The more you talk, the less your employee will talk, so be careful about jumping in too quickly. When responding, don't say, “I know how you feel.” Instead say, “It sounds like you were really frightened by that customer's tone of voice.” Paraphrase what was said, so your employee feels heard. Ask questions using “who,” “what,” “where,” and “how.” These four words elicit additional information, and your employee is less likely to forget something important in his or her story. Remember, this is not psychological counseling. These are practical listening skills for improving any relationship.

■ **When my employee returns from lunch, where he usually has an alcoholic drink, he is much more outwardly friendly and pleasant.**

You should refer your employee to the EAP if you have attempted to correct his tardiness but have been unsuccessful. Do not base the referral on the alcohol use issue. The two issues could be related, but there is no way for you to know for sure. Even if they are related, the performance issue is chronic tardiness, not alcohol use affecting the workplace — at least not in a way that you can document yet. If your employee's

He doesn't appear drunk. This is not a violation of our drug and alcohol policy. He is often late in the morning for work; however he never has alcohol on his breath. What should I do?

■ My employee does not use his safety equipment. I have asked him many times to comply with our safety and OSHA standards, but to no avail. Maybe he doesn't care if he is fired or injured. Can the EAP possibly help? I don't see how.

■ Before I dismiss an employee for performance problems, I always make an EAP referral to give the person a chance to improve. Unfortunately, the EAP has not helped any employee whom I have referred, so everyone referred so far has been let go. Am I doing something wrong or is it the employees?

behavior after lunch interferes with productivity or the work environment, you have grounds for making a referral. Many who suffer from alcoholism are late for work but do not drink before coming to work. Some may drink later in the day or directly after work to ward off ensuing withdrawal symptoms.

Your question is a good one because it shows how easy it is for a supervisor to participate in diagnostic thinking—in this case, by ruling out that an EAP referral would do any good. True, your employee may not care if he is fired for failure to comply with safety rules. But there could be other explanations, including problems with memory, training issues, communication or cultural barriers, or even a personality style that causes him to act out anger in a passive-aggressive way by refusing to use safety equipment. Could his failure to comply with safety rules be related to inconsistent use of rewards for and enforcement of those rules? This is a common reason for poor compliance. It takes a long time to build up a culture of safety in a company, but only a minute to undo it.

It might be your employees, but you may be making referrals too late. As employees slowly acquire performance, attendance, or conduct problems, underlying contributing personal problems also grow worse. Despite short-term improvements in performance that you see after corrective interviews or disciplinary actions, these personal problems do not go away. Predictably, performance problems return. When several weeks of satisfactory performance that follow a corrective interview are suddenly interrupted by performance problems, this is your signal to act and involve the EAP. Personal problems, like job performance problems, are more easily treated the earlier they are discovered, and you're more likely to prevent the loss of your employee with an earlier EAP referral. There is an unfortunate consequence to late-stage supervisor referrals: When other employees associate supervisor referrals to the EAP only with dismissal, their interest in self-referral can diminish. These issues harm your EAP investment.

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