



HAVING THE TALK SECOND IN A SERIES

How to Initiate a Conversation with a Colleague Who Displays Potential Substance Use Disorder

By Jennifer Musselman, LMFT and Leadership Coach

You've been seeing consistent signs for a month or two: excessive lateness or absenteeism; changes in behavior or mood; inability to complete assignments on time (or at all). It's evident that the employee or colleague has a problem, one that may be rooted in substance use disorder, and that it's affecting their performance. What do you say?

As that person's peer or friend, you can speak candidly and **focus on your concerns for their health and well-being**.

As that person's boss, you have to adhere to legal and human resources guidelines and **focus on their work performance**.

Talking to Your Peer

- Invite them out for a walk or for coffee—somewhere away from work and not involving alcohol.
- Say:
 - "You don't seem like yourself lately."
 - "I noticed [specific behavior or incident] and I'm worried that there's something going on here."
 - "Others have been noticing these things, too."
- The person is likely to respond with denial—people rarely admit to a problem right off the bat.
 - "You're crazy!"
 - "There's nothing wrong with me."
 - "Get off my back."
- If appropriate, mention challenges of your own—showing that you're not judging them.
- You're planting a seed. You may need to water it—bring up the subject again later, or approach it from a different angle. This can prompt the person to realize, "Someone is onto me," and may serve as an impetus to seek support or stop the behavior.
- The goal is to help the person begin to contemplate change—and then move to preparation and action.



Talking to Your Employee

- Arrange a private meeting. If you think the employee (not you) will bring up substance abuse, include an HR representative in the meeting.
- Focus on work performance and behavioral issues. Have documentation to discuss such issues as:
 - Absenteeism or lateness
 - Substandard work
 - Behavior issues (particularly if they're causing disruption)
- If the employee responds with anger, defensiveness, sadness, denial, say:
 - "I understand this is difficult."
 - "These things can be hard to hear."
 - "We value you and want to see you get back on track."
- Outline a **performance improvement plan**, with specific benchmarks the employee must hit, such as showing up on time and meeting deadlines. Schedule a date to evaluate progress.
- Emphasize that "We expect that these behaviors will change or you will be terminated."
- If the employee volunteers that they have or suspect a substance use problem, have the HR representative take over to discuss the resources the company can provide.
- Employees are protected from being fired for disclosing a substance use disorder (some exceptions include employment with random drug testing such as firefighting or other contractually bound positions).

Jennifer Musselman

Jennifer Musselman is a psychotherapist and leadership coach in San Francisco and Los Angeles, specializing in the intersection of home and work life with clients from Netflix, Apple, LinkedIn, Glassdoor, Salesforce, Fast Company, and more. Her expertise has been featured in such outlets as Huffington Post, Glamour Magazine and Vice, among many others.

A former corporate executive for MTV Networks/Nickelodeon Television, Musselman went back to school midlife to become a psychotherapist following her own experience with a declining work culture and the impact on her well-being and relationships. Musselman spent four years as a director with the nonprofit CLARE Foundation in Santa Monica, a behavioral health organization helping clients overcome addiction.

Musselman holds a master's degree in Clinical Psychology from Pepperdine University and is completing her doctoral work at USC in Change Management & Leadership. She is licensed by the California State Board of Behavioral Science as a Marriage and Family Therapist.

