

Supporting Employees Through Substance Use Disorder



In the 2021 National Survey on Drug Use and Health,

46.3 million

people met the criteria of having a SUD¹, whether it was binge drinking alcohol, overusing cannabis, or using opioids, like misusing prescription pain relievers and using heroin. However,

94%

did not receive any treatment for their SUD.²

In today's workplace, there are many people who are suffering from substance use disorder (SUD), but are not getting the proper support they need. Without access to prevention strategies or early treatment, employees with SUD may have difficulty showing up to work each day. They may fracture relationships with their family members and colleagues and see their health decline in a significant way.

A recent study showed that substance use disorders cost employer-sponsored health plans about \$35.3 billion a year³, which highlights the high medical fees that result when the condition goes untreated. In addition, SUD can contribute to absenteeism, presenteeism, and on-the-job accidents and injuries, which not only affect a company's bottom line, but also, its workplace culture.

To promote a healthier, more positive workplace, companies should prioritize improving access to mental healthcare, including treatment for SUD, for their employees.





Here are five key considerations to ensure your company's benefits support employees dealing with SUD:

1) Protect the privacy of employees dealing with SUD

Employees should have the ability to seek support for SUD in a confidential manner, without feeling obligated to disclose information about their condition to their employer. Given the shame or stigma employees might feel about substance use, knowing their privacy is protected can increase the likelihood that they would consider getting help. Likewise, when HR personnel identify an employee who is struggling with SUD, they should use a confidential and discreet approach in connecting them with the care they need. Additionally, HR teams should evaluate their internal policies, ensuring that the policies don't negatively impact members for disclosing their SUD needs.


As a comprehensive mental healthcare offering, Headspace connects employees to a mental health coach or to a clinician, all of whom provide confidential, one-to-one support. Headspace also offers support and guidance to managers and HR teams so they can approach and support an employee facing substance use problems in an effective, empathetic, and discreet manner.

2) Utilize a clinically-validated approach to providing care

Employees with SUD should be identified early and their needs should be evaluated using evidence-based guidelines. However, without proper education, screening and early intervention strategies, many employees slip through the cracks and are not identified for early intervention. This can lead to escalating needs and potential increases in costs for employers.

At Headspace, we train all of our coaches and clinicians on SUD screening. Consistent with best practices, our team assesses a member's substance use with a FIDO (Frequency/Intensity/Duration/Onset) approach to understand a member's situation. Alongside FIDO, our care team evaluates:

- The specific substances being used
- The medical and psychological impact of use and potential withdrawal
- The employee's risk profile, including suicidal and homicidal ideation and recent or previous hospitalizations
- The presence of protective factors, including the direct resources or social support available



After we have identified a member's needs, Headspace uses the ASAM (American Society of Addiction Medicine) criteria, which are the most widely-used and comprehensive guidelines available to make determinations about the level of care for SUD. Our care providers may also work within a SUD consultation group or our internal SUD support team, staffed by expert consultants with more than 10 years of supervised training and experience in the field.

3) Adopt a low barrier approach to care

For employees with SUD, it's critical that care is low-barrier and stigma-free, making it easy for members to get the care they need. Unlike traditional programs which may require phone calls or long wait times, a low-barrier approach allows people with SUD to easily engage, have their needs identified proactively, and seamlessly begin a treatment plan.

With multiple ways to access care, including phone, chat, and in-person, Headspace meets varying member preferences and makes it easy to take the first step to getting care. Through a seamless consumer-grade experience, members are quickly connected to the care they need, whether it be mental health coaching, therapy, psychiatry, or a referral to a higher level of care.

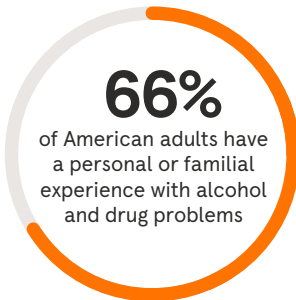
4) Reduce stigma around substance use

According to a 2023 Kaiser Family Foundation poll, 66% of American adults have a personal or familial experience with alcohol and drug problems.⁴ However, there is still a pervasive stigma around SUD, and HR leaders can do more to support their employees that may be struggling. Only 29% of employers have used communications to raise awareness of substance use issues, treatment, and/or resources.⁵

To reduce the stigma, HR leaders should rethink their traditional SUD programs and consider investing in approachable and engaging mental healthcare offerings that can deliver effective SUD care while also raising awareness and reducing stigma. Training programs for HR personnel and managers can also help to increase knowledge of substance abuse, allowing for better approaches to caring for employees with SUD.

Headspace's approachable and empathetic communications and workshops help to make mental health and SUD support a regular part of the workplace. Our engagement strategy facilitates culture change and helps HR teams to reduce the stigma around seeking SUD care. Once members engage with us, Headspace coaches and clinicians, delivering virtual care in the privacy of your employees phone, allow a smoother, de-stigmatized door to care for SUD.

Coaches welcome members into care, allowing a safe space to explore ambivalence and provide support and guidance. Coaches and clinicians use evidence-based techniques like motivational interviewing and measurable goal setting to support members with substance use. This approach allows for an empathy- and evidence-driven first step towards recovery.



5) Provide easy access to varied levels of care and resources

Substance use issues are wide-ranging, and employees with SUD should be able to find appropriate, continuous care and resources as their needs change. To manage mild or moderate SUD, employees should be able to easily access coaching, therapy, and/or psychiatry sessions, as well as self-guided resources to address symptoms, learn new coping skills, and improve their overall well-being.

For those who require highly-specialized, medically-supervised, or in-person care, an effective referral system should be in place. When an employee's symptoms are well managed, they should be supported in returning to work and "stepping down" into outpatient care. Unfortunately, only 4% of employers have addressed continuity of care from treatment into the recovery phase.⁵

Employees with access to the Headspace platform have a variety of resources available to support them through SUD.

4%

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FOR THOSE WITH MILD TO MODERATE SUD, THEY CAN ACCESS COACHING AND VIDEO THERAPY OR PSYCHIATRY, WHERE TREATMENT MAY INCLUDE:

- Cognitive restructuring to identify and eliminate unhealthy thoughts around substance use and other topics
- Medication to treat co-occurring conditions (i.e. Major Depressive Disorder or Generalized Anxiety Disorder) as appropriate
- Medications to support the treatment of illnesses like Alcohol Use Disorder

FOR THOSE WITH MODERATE TO SEVERE NEEDS, HEADSPACE OFFERS:

- Referrals to in-person care, including Intensive Outpatient Programs, Partial Hospitalization Programs and Inpatient Treatment
- Case management support for referrals to community support, insurance guidance, childcare resources, financial support, legal support
- Support when symptoms are well-managed, including Headspace outpatient clinical services focused on relapse prevention and stabilization

As a holistic mental healthcare program, Headspace is committed to providing a variety of interventions, including the ones listed above, to address substance use and increase the overall well-being of employees dealing with these concerns.

To learn more about how Headspace can help support your employees dealing with SUD, [contact us here](#).

¹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2021. [Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2021 National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#).

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023. [SAMHSA Announces National Survey on Drug Use and Health \(NSDUH\) Results Detailing Mental Illness and Substance Use Levels in 2021](#).

³ JAMA, 2023. [Medical Costs of Substance Use Disorders in the US Employer-Sponsored Insurance Population](#).

⁴ KFF, 2023. [KFF Tracking Poll July 2023: Substance Use Crisis And Accessing Treatment](#).

⁵ Source: Mercer Health and Benefit Strategies for 2024 Report