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OCTOBER 7, 2011

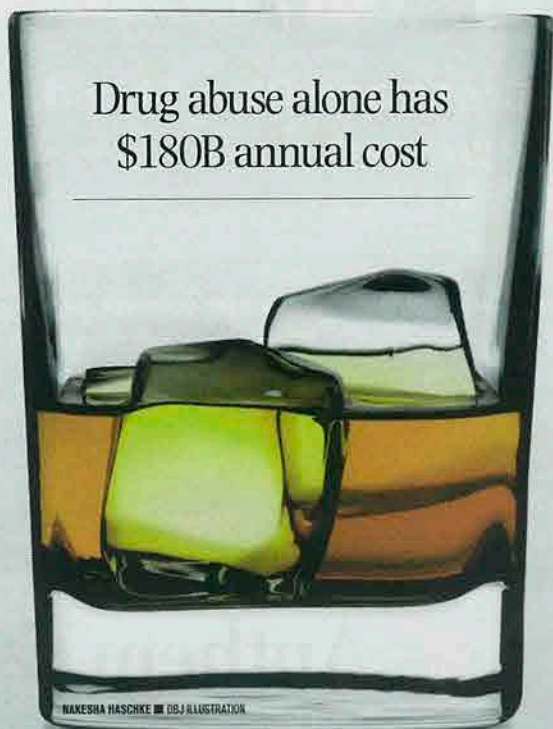
FOCUS ON HEALTH CARE

Addictions to drugs and alcohol can be serious issues in the workplace.

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ADDICTION IMPACTS FAMILIES AND WORKPLACES



Drug abuse alone has \$180B annual cost

BY LAURA ENGLEHART
DEJ STAFF REPORTER

Addicts come in all shapes and sizes — from low-income workers to white-collar executives who buckle under job stress and responsibility. Though widely ignored and stigmatized, drug and alcohol dependency prevails in the workplace, and leads to billions of dollars in lost productivity and health care costs.

A former general manager for a building materials supply company in Florida, Mike said his job contributed to an alcohol addiction that cost him his family. The 41-year-old Cincinnati native took in more than \$300,000 annually, but he quickly learned, as the time-weathered axiom rings, money can't buy happiness. Long work hours on weekdays and weekends encroached on personal time at home and business trips often pressured Mike to eat and drink socially. Not only that, but alcohol became a way to tolerate his misery, he said.

"Everywhere I traveled, people wanted to eat and drink some drinks. You start to become a different person," Mike said.

Soon, the tired corporate executive was drinking every night and consuming almost four gallons of whisky a week. And though Mike says he never drank at work, he found excuses to leave early to hit up a bar or drive to the liquor store.

"There were a couple of times when I left early saying I wasn't feeling well and I went to drink," Mike said.

When the recession hit hard in 2008, Mike took a pay cut and lost commission dollars to the stunted market. His salary dropped to about \$50,000. At the same time, he continued to work nearly 70 hours a week and his drinking problem only worsened. Finally, one morning, not willing to go to work, Mike called his boss and said, "I need help."

The economic cost of drug abuse alone totals more than \$180 billion annually, according to a government report. This includes resources to address health and crime consequences, as well as the loss of potential productivity from disability, death and withdrawal from the legitimate workforce.

Research shows that about 20.3 million adults in the U.S. last year were considered substance dependent or abusive, down from 22.5 million in 2009. Of those, nearly half were employed full time.

The survey shows that alcohol use was higher among full-time employed adults (65 percent) than unemployed adults (56 percent).

Illicit drug use rates, however, were higher among unemployed persons compared to those employed.

Occupations with the highest reported substance abuse rates include workers in construction, sales, restaurants and transportation jobs.

Employer response

The day Mike hit rock bottom and called his boss, the company decided to send him on an all-expenses-paid trip to The Ridge, a 14-bed, upscale treatment center on a 51-acre site about 25 miles east of Cincinnati in Batavia Township. Mike says he probably received special treatment because he held a high position within the company.

"I hope they would do that for anyone, but unfortunately, not every employee has the same impact as other employees," Mike said. "I knew the owner personally. (The company) sent me all over the world. I've done so much for that company."

Mike stayed 28 days at The Ridge to complete a treatment program, which cost roughly \$900 a day.

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bizjournals.com/dayton
VOL. 22 NO. 41 \$2.00

DAYTON

October 7, 2011

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ADDICTION: Former worker returned to workplace to thank company for treatment

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Though Mike might represent the exception, health insurance providers typically have an employee assistance program included in premium prices that spans a wide range, including occupational therapy, mental health issues, eating disorders, depression and addiction, said Valerie Bogdan-Powers, group operations vice president for Cincinnati-based Horan, an insurance and wealth management consulting firm. In August, the company announced its plans to expand into the Dayton region with an office in Kettering Tower.

Though employees typically can receive some assistance through their insurance plan, addiction is not something routinely addressed, she said.

"It's not an area we talk a lot about with employers. I think based on the fact that employee benefits are run through an HR department, it's not a typical thing that employees probe on because they have to go through HR. People do a lot more private searches," said Bogdan-Powers, who oversees a team that services more than 400 corporate clients.

Still, whether an employee receives help depends on the employer. Small and large companies tend to better help their employees through situations, while mid-size companies (100 to 300 workers) have a hard time providing necessary care, she said.

"I don't think it's that people don't care; I think it's the reality of what they're facing," Bogdan-Powers said.

She added that mid-size companies do not have the same "comfy" atmosphere as small businesses, nor do they have the ability to function without an employee as easily as large companies.

All companies have started to focus more heavily on employee wellness by providing health assessments. And almost all 400 Horan clients ask job candidates to submit to drug screenings. Some even screen for smokers, Bogdan-Powers said.

The result

Federal law does not prevent employers from terminating employees who use illegal drugs, whether routinely or casually. However, limited research in some states shows that employers who treat employees addicted to drugs or alcohol will reap a return on their investment.

A study conducted in California found

that treatment has a benefit-cost ratio of 7:1. Savings were realized in reduced crime costs and increased employer earnings. Another study showed that for every \$100,000 spent on treatment, \$487,000 in health care costs and \$700,000 in crime costs were avoided.

In 1995, the Ohio Department of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services conducted a follow-up survey of 668 substance abuse treatment residents one year after completing treatment. Findings indicated that absenteeism decreased by 89 percent, tardiness by 92 percent and on-the-job injuries by 57 percent.

Additionally, treated employees become more productive and loyal to the company, said Steven Gifford, program director at The Ridge.

"The overall response (from patients) is that they're working less and being more productive," Gifford said. "Some were working 50 to 60 hours weeks; now they're working 30 to 35 hours, but they're getting more work done."

And, Gifford said, those employees appreciate the risk their employer took on them.

"It brings up a loyalty issues. They think, 'If the company is willing to support me through treatment, I'll stick with them, because they were behind me during the difficult times,'" he said.

Gifford estimates that about 90 percent of The Ridge's patients return to work after they complete a treatment plan.

To address employee drug or alcohol dependency, SAMHSA recommends:

- Employers establish a drug- and alcohol-free workplace policy;
- Train supervisors to detect signs of substance use and mental disorders and educate employees about how they can impact the workplace;
- Provide an employee assistance program;
- Start a drug-testing program;
- Encourage work-life balance; and
- Offer free space to employees to hold support group meetings.

As for Mike, he has stayed sober for more than three months since he landed in a treatment center. He no longer works for the company that sent him to The Ridge, and though his job pushed him to drink to cope with the stress and unhappiness it brought, Mike says he owes the company a lot.

Following treatment and prior to returning to Florida, a clean and healthier Mike drove from The Ridge to the company's Pittsburgh headquarters to thank the executives there.

"I thought it would be cheap to thank them any other way," Mike said. "They needed to see how they helped me."

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