

What are Some Examples of a Potential Problem?

An employee in a Zoom meeting appears disheveled and distracted. A direct report is calling out frequently, coming in late, or leaving early. A colleague that is normally gregarious and social becomes withdrawn and isolated. A team member appears overwhelmed and unable to fulfill their job responsibilities. The quality and quantity of work by a normally productive employee deteriorates significantly.

Why is Upstream Intervention Important?

These behaviors may indicate that an employee is struggling with their mental well-being. It is imperative that managers recognize the warning signs and respond quickly and appropriately. If you think of a river flowing downstream, think about intervening early, or upstream, before the problem gains momentum, creating a more serious problem and requiring a more intensive and expensive downstream intervention.

For example, an employee with mild to moderate depression may benefit from EAP counseling, exercise, and other lifestyle interventions. If left unaddressed, the depression may worsen until the employee is missing work, or even struggling with suicidality or psychosis.

Another example is an employee who recognizes that their alcohol use may be crossing the line into problematic usage. They work with an EAP counselor to develop and implement harm reduction strategies to bring their use back into safe drinking guidelines. Unaddressed, the alcohol misuse may progress into dependence or even a full-blown addiction process that will be harder to treat and will have life-altering implications for the employee and the workplace. If we wait until an employee shows up drunk on a Zoom call, they are far down the road to addiction and the way back will be more difficult, if the employee even has that opportunity.

What are the Consequences for Failing to Intervene Early?

Everyone pays a price when the warning signs are not recognized or heeded. The employee endangers their health, their job, their relationships, and perhaps their life. They may become difficult to work with, cause conflict and disruption in the workplace, and fail to fulfill their responsibilities.

If left unaddressed, these issues affect the morale of the entire workplace. Colleagues may become resentful, distracted, and feel unsafe. Presenteeism and absenteeism among other employees may increase, creating a ripple effect of low morale and decreased productivity.

The bottom line of the organization will be impacted through lost productivity, higher healthcare claims, legal liability, and reputational risk. All stakeholders benefit from upstream intervention, and all stakeholders will pay a price for failing to be proactive in recognizing and responding to early warning signs.

What are the Behavioral Warning Signs to Look for?

The charts show some examples of warning signs. It is important to note that these are **documentable and observable** workplace behaviors, not psychological symptoms. Remember, it is your job to observe and document behaviors and take appropriate action, not to speculate on psychological symptoms or diagnosis; this is an important distinction to keep in mind when considering behaviors in the context of the workplace.

Also note that these behaviors are very similar regardless of the underlying issue and typically fall into the general performance areas below. Thus, it is important to have established a relationship with the individual employee in which it is natural to express concern, ask open-ended questions and listen to the employee with your full attention.

Performance Areas

- Attendance and availability
- Appearance, attitude and behavior
- Productivity and performance
- Relationships (work and personal)
- Safety and policy
- Appearing numb or emotionless
- Withdrawing from work activity
- Overworking
- Forgetfulness
- Having difficulty with work transitions or changes in routines

Signs of Grief

- Decreased productivity
- Decreased focus
- Increased irritability and snappiness
- Missed deadlines
- Decreased overall morale
- Increased accident-illness rate
- Defensiveness
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Presenteeism

Signs of Stress or Mental Ill-Health

- An increase in unexplained absences or sick leave
- Poor performance
- Poor time-keeping
- Increased use of alcohol, drugs, tobacco or caffeine
- Frequent headaches and backaches
- Withdrawal from social contact
- Poor judgment / indecision
- Constant tiredness or low energy
- Unusual displays of emotion, e.g. frequent irritability or tearfulness
- Working more slowly
- Missing deadlines
- Increased difficulty concentrating

Signs of Substance Misuse

- Absenteeism
- Deterioration in quality and quantity of work
- Doing enough work to just “get by”
- Deterioration in appearance and/or personal hygiene
- Sleep and/or appetite issues
- Inappropriate verbal, emotional and/or behavioral responses
- Isolation from family, friends and colleagues
- Lack of focus, concentration and forgetfulness
- Exaggerated sense of well-being

Impact at work

- Lateness/Absenteeism
- Presenteeism
- Procrastination
- Missed deadlines
- Overall decline in work quality/quantity
- Inappropriate behavior/attitude
- Interpersonal difficulties
- Threats to self or others
- Requires more of manager's time
- Distracts work group

How Do you Assess Whether There is a Problem?

1. Am I observing patterns or clusters of behaviors that indicate a problem? One behavior may not mean anything; clusters of behaviors are meaningful when considered in context. Be aware that absenteeism is a major indicator of a problem.
2. Have I observed a change or increase in behaviors over a period of 3-6 months?
3. Is this behavior a departure from the employee's usual way of being? For example, has an employee who is usually easy-going now getting into conflicts with coworkers? Has an outgoing, gregarious joker become withdrawn and isolated? Is a punctual, reliable employee suddenly calling out or not showing up for work?

If you can answer yes to all three questions, don't ignore or delay taking action.

What Can Get in the Way of Responding Effectively?

Our own emotions can sometimes get in the way of correctly recognizing signs of distress and responding appropriately. Here are some things to consider:

- **Misreading signs of distress.** Our tendency is to ignore early warning signs and miss the opportunity to intervene upstream. We may have a hard time deciding whether this is normal behavior or we may misinterpret absenteeism and poor performance.
- **Lack of resources.** If you lack skills, don't know what to say or where to get help, you might avoid or ignore the situation. Skills training, seeking consultation from your HR Director or EAP, and knowledge of resources available to both managers and employees, are important tools in responding effectively to challenging situations.
- **Our own emotional state.** If we are distracted by our own issues, we may not notice someone's distress or may misinterpret the behavior; this makes it hard to do an objective assessment. Use strategies like deep breathing or an app to self-regulate your emotions so that you can address situations as calmly and objectively as possible.
- **Our own work demands.** If we are overloaded with work, we may be too busy to notice, or we may notice signs but feel our own work must take precedence.

If you suspect that your emotions may be getting in the way of responding effectively in your role as manager, seek out consultation or professional counseling.

How Do You Start the Conversation?

Here are a few examples of questions* you can ask to start a conversation. Remember that the conversation is going to be better received if a relationship of trust has already been established.

- You've been on my mind a lot lately, and I would like to share why ...
- I'd like to talk to you about how you're doing/feeling because I care about you, I'm feeling concerned, and I'd like to help. Would you be open to a conversation?
- You haven't seemed like yourself for a little while, and I'd like to check in for a few minutes. Is now a good time?

* Webinar-How To Talk About Mental Health at Work, Deborah Grayson Riegel, Udemy for Business

What Are Some Things to Keep in Mind?

- Document observable behaviors not symptoms.
- Address your own issues that may interfere with your ability to intervene effectively.
- Begin a conversation with the employee, asking open-ended questions.
- Listen with your full attention. If you are not a natural listener, consider improving your skill in this area.
- Take appropriate action based on the situation. Be sure to immediately address any imminent threats, such as harm to self or others.
- Seek consultation when needed. Don't try to handle serious situations alone. Speak with your manager or an EAP account manager to develop a strategy, which may include a suggested or mandatory referral.
- Know your resources and how to access them. Part of your role as a manager is to help facilitate connecting employees with appropriate resources, whether that is EAP counseling, legal or financial benefits or other well-being programs.

If you have a challenging situation or an employee with concerning behavior that you would like to discuss, reach out to your EAP account manager, who can help you develop a strategy to address the issue. It is hard to overstate the importance of recognizing problems early and connecting employees with support and resources that will allow them to navigate challenging times successfully and stay productive and happy in their work.