

# Solutions

FAMILY  
SERVICES



EMPLOYEE  
ASSISTANCE  
PROGRAMS

NEWSLETTER

Issue 43

## *Should you be at work today?*

**Working when you are in any way impaired is dangerous.**

You have a lot of work to do. You don't want to fall behind. Your clients and co-workers are depending on you. You don't want the boss to think you are slacking off...The list goes on and on. No matter how bad we feel, we can always think of reasons to go to work. For the most part, we take pride in our work and simply want to do a good job. But working while impaired—physically, mentally or emotionally unable to carry out your daily routine—can harm you, your co-workers and even your company's bottom line.

“Presenteeism” is the latest buzz word to emerge out of healthy workplace research. It refers to lost productivity caused by people continuing to come to work despite being impaired due to illness, injury, stress, or even drugs and alcohol. With an estimated price tag of more than \$1 billion dollars each year, both employees and managers need to understand the costs associated with impaired workers, and strive to create a healthier, safer and, ultimately, more productive work environment.

### **What does it mean to be “impaired”?**

Impairment doesn't simply mean being under the influence of drugs or alcohol. While workplace substance abuse is one example, a person is impaired whenever they are physically, mentally or emotionally unable to perform their job properly.

Feeling sick due to a bad cold, the flu, injury, allergies or other illnesses, are also types of impairment. In addition, the pain relievers, antihistamines or cold medications you may take to treat your symptoms could end up making you even more impaired and unproductive.

Being impaired doesn't just include physical effects either. Emotional problems such as being highly stressed, burned out, or suffering from depression or another mental illness can also lead to impairment at work. Problems associated with work-life conflict—such as trying to juggle family and work responsibilities—can also leave you distracted, emotionally drained, and unable to concentrate on your job.

### **The cost of being impaired**

According to a 1999 study, lost productivity due to sick or impaired workers was 7.5 times larger than the lost productivity from those who stayed home! Not only do sick workers not perform their jobs as well as they could, they also run the risk of infecting their colleagues with colds and flus, and therefore causing more lost productivity than if they hadn't come to work at all.

As well, the side effects of some medications can be dangerous if your job requires you to stay alert—such as driving or working heavy machinery. Being impaired due to drugs and alcohol, or even being “hung over” from the night before, can also threaten the safety of your co-workers, your clients and yourself.

Finally, people who are depressed, stressed or coping with family problems may become irritable, unreliable and unable to concentrate. In addition, these negative attitudes can infect other workers, creating an unhealthy and unproductive workplace.

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# *Should you be at work today? (continued)*

## **Are you impaired?**

You owe it to yourself, your colleagues, and your company to make an assessment each day concerning your readiness to work. Try asking yourself the following questions:

1. Am I taking any medications that might affect my ability and judgment at work?
2. Am I suffering from any illnesses that affect how well I am able to do my job?
3. Is missing sleep, or poor nutrition interfering with my readiness for work?
4. Do I have unresolved emotional or relationship issues that will distract me from the task at hand?
5. Am I hung over from using drugs or alcohol?
6. Have I recovered from my injury enough to fully return to my duties?
7. Am I able to bring all my skills and attention at my workplace today?

If you identify influences that might impair your performance at work, take the time to ask for help addressing these issues. Your boss, human resources manager, or EAP counselor can help you find the appropriate solutions and support you need to be ready to go back to work as soon as possible.

## **What can be done to help?**

Everyone must work together to reduce impairment at work. If you are an employee, you can contribute to a healthy workplace by simply staying home when you are sick. This way you will recover quicker and not spread your cold or flu to anyone else. It's also important for employees to seek out appropriate help for addiction, mental illnesses and family conflicts. In fact, your EAP counselor will be happy to put you in touch with local organizations and health professionals who are able to help.

Employers should also work towards the goal of a healthy and happy work environment. Studies show that workers who have good work/life balance are more satisfied and more productive

than those who are under stress trying to balance family and work obligations. By implementing "family friendly" options, such as flexible work weeks or tele-work, businesses can help reduce their employees' stress levels and allow them to focus on their jobs.

Active living is another important element to a healthy workplace. As our jobs become more and more sedentary, Canadians, in general, are becoming unhealthy and out of shape. By encouraging workers to incorporate physical activity into their daily routine, active living programs increase energy, decrease stress and create more positive attitudes in the workplace. Being physically active also helps prevent back injuries, neck pain, headaches and other illnesses that come from sitting for long periods of time.

Education programs that reinforce overall health and wellness, such as stress management, heart health and nutrition—as well as workplace safety—also help reduce impairment at work. Screening programs that identify employees suffering from physical or mental illnesses and offer support and treatment are also essential.

Finally, in order for any healthy workplace program to work, managers must set a clear example. No matter what company policy may say, if the boss works late every night, workers will be reluctant to take time off. Managers and employers must take care of their own health, and their employees will be encouraged to do the same.

## **Website Resources**

**Active Living at Work (Health Canada)**  
<http://www.activelivingatwork.com>

**Canada's Healthy Workplace Week**  
<http://www.nqi.ca/chww/>

**Healthy Workplace (National Quality Institute)**  
<http://www.nqi.ca/hwr>

**Workplace Health (Canadian Health Network)**  
[http://www.canadian-health-network.ca/1workplace\\_health.html](http://www.canadian-health-network.ca/1workplace_health.html)

Family Services offers confidential professional assistance on a wide variety of personal and work-related issues. For more information on your EAP, call: **1-800-668-9920**.