

Substance Use Health in the Workplace ***Not talking about it costs everyone.***

Seven Practical Recommendations

Introduction

With more than 21.5 million Canadians employed¹ and 77% reporting the use of one or more substances², Substance Use Health is a critical yet overlooked dimension of workplace wellness. In fact, only 9% of Canadian workplaces have policies in place to support this facet of health³. Employers readily promote health benefits like dental cleanings, massages, or vacation days, but what if employee well-being went beyond physical and mental health?

Despite this evident gap, conversations around Substance Use Health are absent in most workplaces. CAPSA's research—the largest experiential evidence base of its kind in Canada—shows that stigma is at the core of this silence. Shockingly, 86% of people have never spoken to anyone about their Substance Use Health⁴, and 3 in 5 employees would not disclose concerns due to fear of job loss, suspension, or discrimination⁵.

This silence carries real costs. Stigma not only worsens health outcomes and weighs on families and communities, but it also creates complex challenges for workplaces. Canadian workplaces absorb 46% of the total economic cost of substance use—\$22.4 billion in lost productivity—almost more than healthcare and criminal justice costs combined⁶.

Current approaches are outdated, harmful, and expensive. It is time for a new direction. With 78% of Canadians agreeing that Substance Use Health is an urgent matter⁴, the case for change—and leadership—is clear.

CAPSA's Healthy Workplace Services, built on thousands of conversations, trainings, and surveys, offer seven practical, actionable recommendations to help Canadian workplaces foster safer, healthier environments for everyone.

Practical Recommendations

1. Be Proactive, Not Reactive:

Focusing only on substance use disorders leaves most workers out of the conversation, keeping workplace costs unaddressed. Substance Use Health spans a spectrum—and so should your approach. Promote health, do not just respond to crises.

2. Prioritize Supportive Environments Over “Signs and Symptoms”:

Instead of searching for “signs and symptoms”, focus on building a workplace culture where employees feel safe asking for resources. A supportive environment reduces stigma and drives lasting change.

3. Evaluate & Elevate with Organizational Assessments:

Every workplace has their strengths and areas for improvement. See the whole picture with [CAPSA's Assessment Tool](#), designed to evaluate and elevate policies and practices through a Substance Use Health lens.

4. Enhance Policies with a Health-Driven Strategy:

It is time to retire outdated, stigmatizing terms like “substance abuse”. We urge employers to go further by also updating their policies and procedures. CAPSA can help transform policies that may be rooted in stigmatizing beliefs to reflect best practices in health promotion and compassionate care. Contact info@capsa.ca to get started.

5. Make Learning Ongoing and Actionable:

Training is not a one-time checkbox. CAPSA's programs equip staff at all levels to challenge stigma, build skills, and embed health-focused principles into every day workplace culture. Learn more at <https://capsa.ca/training/>.

6. Embrace the All People, All Pathways Approach:

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to wellness around Substance Use Health. Support should be inclusive, self-directed, and based on trust—not conditions or timelines.

7. Make Support Easy to Access and Talk About:

Do your employees know how to access Substance Use Health support? More importantly, do they feel safe using it? Audit your benefits, provide ongoing education and clear information, and ensure support is accessible across the entire spectrum.



**Scan here to learn about CAPSA's
Healthy Workplace Services**

Conclusion

Workplaces that ignore Substance Use Health do so at their peril. The approach you take matters. Leading with equity, evidence, and inclusive health promotion not only improves lives, it also boosts productivity and helps attract and retain skilled workers.

References

Statistics Canada. Labour Force Survey, January 2025.; 2025. Accessed March 25, 2025. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/250207/dq250207a-eng.htm>

Canada H. Canadian Alcohol and Drugs Survey (CADS): Summary of Results for 2019. December 20, 2021. Accessed April 17, 2025. <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/canadian-alcohol-drugs-survey/2019-summary.html>

Meister SR. A Review of Workplace Substance Use Policies in Canada: Strengths, Gaps and Key Considerations. Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction Published online 2018.

Peters B, Garner G, Williamson L. A Starting Place: Understanding Systematic Stigma Barriers to Knowledge About Substance Use Health and Associated Services in Canada. Published online April 2024. <https://capsa.ca/2023/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/ENGLISH-Starting-Place-Understanding-System-Stigma-Barriers-compressed-1.pdf>

Meister SR. Timmins Summit Summary Report. Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction; 2024.

Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction. Canadian Substance Use Costs and Harms Report (2007–2020); 2020. <https://csuch.ca/resources/costs-and-harms/>

Who We Are

CAPSA is a national organization that dismantles systemic stigma and promotes health across a spectrum of substance use—from non-use to substance use disorder. Our team of policy analysts, health professionals, educators, and researchers combines technical expertise with lived and living experiences to deliver relevant and evidence-based health programs.

How to Cite this Document

Hyland, A., Belaire Scharf, S., Esposti, A. (2025). Not talking about it costs everyone: Substance Use Health in the Workplace. Seven Practical Recommendations. CAPSA. <https://capsa.ca/resources/>

Are you looking for guidance implementing these recommendations? Check out CAPSA's Healthy Workplace Services! Visit: <https://capsa.ca/services/healthy-workplaces/>