



Tips for Disaster Responders:

IDENTIFYING SUBSTANCE MISUSE IN THE RESPONDER COMMUNITY

A prepared responder workforce is a substance-free workforce.

Disaster response work often occurs in disturbing settings that may include gruesome images, frightening sounds, and life-threatening situations. Despite the distressing environment, disaster responders are able to engage in this work because they:

- Are highly trained.
- Work well in structured settings.
- Possess a shared sense of mission.
- Have a strong group identity.
- Function well under stress.
- Rely on the predictable performance of peers for everyone's safety.

However, sometimes the disturbing scenarios may also remind responders of other distressing events, and such memories can contribute to relapse for those in recovery. All of these factors can create a higher-than-average risk for misusing substances such as alcohol, illegal drugs, and prescription medication. Some disaster responders use substances as a way to help forget their experiences. Others use them to numb their emotional pain and escape the intensity of these situations. Substance misuse can compromise the effectiveness of the response work.

Traditionally, disaster responders have been identified as law enforcement personnel, firefighters, emergency management personnel, and paramedics. The definition has recently been broadened to include disaster behavioral health professionals, faith-based representatives, and other community volunteers.

The goal of this tip sheet is to provide you with information on the warning signs of misusing alcohol, prescription medication, or other substances. Knowing these signs can help you identify problems, provide support, and even prevent the development of these problems in yourself, a friend, or a coworker.

Indicators of Possible Substance Misuse: What Do You Notice in Yourself, a Friend, or a Coworker?

This list can help you increase your awareness of how substance misuse may affect both your personal and professional life. It is not a clinical assessment.



PHYSICAL/EMOTIONAL INDICATORS

- Tremors (e.g., shaking or twitching of hands or eyelids)
- The smell of alcohol on the breath or marijuana on clothing
- Burned fingers or lips, needle marks on arms
- Slurred speech or incoherence
- Hyperactivity, too much energy (e.g., appearing anxious)
- Lethargy, falling asleep easily
- Impaired coordination or unsteady gait (e.g., staggering, off balance)
- Wide mood swings (e.g., overactive, very talkative and then alternately withdrawn or isolative)
- Often fearful for no apparent reason
- Increasingly angry or defiant
- Bloodshot eyes
- Frequent nosebleeds possibly related to snorted drugs
- A decline in hygiene or attention to personal tasks
- Abnormally slow movements or slower reaction time

SOCIAL/BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

- Uses alcohol or other substances more than intended or more frequently.
- Experiences increased strain in relationships (e.g., family, professional).
- Isolates self from peers, friends, and family, as well as from routine activities.
- Is unsuccessful in efforts to cut down or control substance misuse.
- Needs more of the substance to get the same feeling (i.e., has an increased tolerance for the substance).
- Does not maintain obligations at work, school, or home because of substance misuse.
- Talks regularly about getting high.
- Spends a great deal of time and money trying to obtain the substance.
- Misuses sick leave to recover from substance misuse.
- Expends energy on denying, lying about, or covering up substance misuse.
- Continues misuse despite associated problems.
- Experiences recurrent substance-related legal problems (e.g., stopped for driving under the influence or involved in domestic incidents).

COGNITIVE/MENTAL INDICATORS

- Experiences blackouts, or has difficulty remembering events that occurred while under the influence.
- Has difficulty making decisions, concentrating, or attending to a task.

- Has short-term memory loss.
- Has difficulty following instructions on the scene or in the office.
- Needs repeated assistance with completing ordinary paperwork.

When To Seek Help

If you have decided to seek help for yourself, congratulations! You have accomplished one of the most difficult steps in the process. If you are considering taking action to help someone else, remember that person may seek to protect his or her behaviors and hide his or her use pattern. Keep in mind that when seeking help for either yourself or someone else, you may experience challenges along the path to recovery. The stigma attached to seeking help for substance misuse, especially in the first responder community, can be difficult to bear. Some may feel concerned about the effect that seeking help may have on their career. Often people feel that help will not work, that their identity might not be kept confidential, or even that they do not deserve help. The good news is that many people who seek help for a substance misuse problem succeed and go on to live healthy and productive lives. Taking action may be your opportunity to make the difference in your own life or in the life of someone you care about.

If you are thinking about your own path to recovery, consider the following:

- Think about telling someone you trust, who understands and will support you through this effort. It is also a good idea to let those close to you know what you are going through and to tell them how they can help.
- Consider reaching out to a faith leader, mentor, or someone else who has helped you in the past and enlisting this person for support.



- Find new ways to manage stress, such as with exercise, stretching, deep breathing, acupuncture, massage, and connections with trusted friends and family members.
- Look for local programs and providers. Groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and Al-Anon are free of charge and offer confidential assistance several times per week.

If you are trying to help a friend or coworker, you may want to do the following:

- Express your concern directly to your friend or coworker when he or she is not under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. Emphasize to your friend how much you care, and remind the person that he or she is not alone. Offer to accompany your friend to a recovery meeting or to help find other assistance. If you have tried speaking with your coworker and he or she is not receptive, consider talking with your team leader or supervisor about your concerns. Chances are, your supervisor is already aware of the situation and can take the necessary steps to get the person the help he or she needs and deserves.
- Consider arranging for a strategic intervention. This may involve several other people and should be coordinated by an experienced behavioral health professional.

Helpful Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

5600 Fishers Lane

Rockville, MD 20857

Toll-free: 1-877-SAMHSA-7 (1-877-726-4727)

TTY: 1-800-487-4889

Email: samhsainfo@samhsa.hhs.gov

SAMHSA Store: <https://store.samhsa.gov>

SAMHSA Disaster Technical Assistance Center (DTAC)

Toll-free: 1-800-308-3515

Email: dtac@samhsa.hhs.gov

Website: <https://www.samhsa.gov/dtac>

SAMHSA National Recovery Month

Website: <https://www.samhsa.gov/recovery-month>

SAMHSA Disaster Mobile App

Website: <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/samhsa-disaster>

National Institute on Drug Abuse

Website: <https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/treatment>

Treatment Locators

FindTreatment.gov

Website: <https://findtreatment.gov/locator>

SAMHSA's National Helpline

Toll-free: 1-800-662-HELP (1-800-662-4357) (24/7/365 treatment referral information service in English and español)

TTY: 1-800-487-4889

Website: <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>

Hotlines

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Call or text: 988

Chat: 988lifeline.org

(Español) Línea de Prevención del Suicidio y Crisis: 988

For TTY users: Use your preferred relay service or dial 711 and then 988.

Website: <https://988lifeline.org>

Website (español): <https://988lifeline.org/es/home>

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Photos are for illustrative purposes only.

Any person depicted in the photo is a model.

The worst thing you can do is nothing.

Most people who misuse substances are not able to stop without support from others. Take the first step to help yourself, a friend, or a coworker.

Many peer recovery and support programs are available. Some responder organizations have Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) that focus specifically on substance misuse. Start by checking for your company's EAP, or if you know a trusted health or behavioral health counselor, you may want to contact him or her for help. You can also download the SAMHSA Behavioral Health Disaster Response Mobile App and access a directory of behavioral health service providers in your area. You might also try the treatment locators, hotlines, and other resources that are listed in the **Helpful Resources** section on this page.



SAMHSA
Substance Abuse and Mental Health
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