

An Employer's Response to Medication-Assisted Treatment of Substance Use Disorder

As employers look for solutions to attract and retain a stable workforce, many are shifting their drug-free workplace stance from zero tolerance to one that supports people in recovery from substance use disorder (SUD). With this shift comes the need for businesses to broaden their perspectives and practices to support the unique needs of those in recovery. This includes the use of prescription medications to boost recovery outcomes – referred to as medication-assisted treatment (MAT). Despite MAT's proven effectiveness, particularly in the treatment of opioid use disorder, many employers remain confused (and even skeptical) about how to respond to an employee's use of these prescribed medications.

First Things First

To understand MAT, employers first need to understand the disease it treats. SUD is a chronic medical condition – a disease of the brain – which, like heart disease and type II diabetes, is caused by multiple factors, including personal choice and heredity. While heart disease interferes with proper heart functions, SUD affects normal brain functions, specifically impacting the frontal cortex, which is associated with judgment and decision making. The brain's pleasure center, located in the center of the brain, is also affected. With chronic and continued drug use, the progression of the brain disease looks like this:

- Prolonged drug use causes physical changes in the brain.
- These changes manifest in distorted thoughts, behavior and judgment.
- It becomes difficult for the user to feel pleasure naturally.
- Taking the drug becomes a matter of survival.
- In time, the drug no longer produces a high. Instead, the person continues using it to feel normal.

In addition to being preventable, SUD is also a treatable condition, according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), a handbook used by health care professionals to diagnose mental disorders. But there's no such thing as a "cookie-cutter" approach to treatment. It's a complex medical condition requiring individualized treatment that addresses both the symptoms and underlying causes of the disease. Treatment commonly consists of group and individual therapy sessions that teach the skills needed for recovery. The use of MAT is increasingly being included for more holistic and effective outcomes.

Employers understanding and accepting the use of medication in addiction treatment is a healthy step toward supporting employees in maintaining recovery.

What Is Medication-Assisted Treatment?

MAT uses FDA-approved prescription medications (e.g., methadone, buprenorphine/suboxone, naltrexone) combined with counseling and other behavioral therapies to treat SUD. These medications help normalize brain chemistry and body functions by modifying or blocking brain receptors to prevent the "high" while reducing or eliminating cravings and painful withdrawal symptoms.

Additionally, the medications used with MAT can be useful at various stages of the recovery process, including during detox, and are effective in preventing a recurrence of symptoms – also called a relapse. Research shows that people have better treatment outcomes with the use of medication along with psychological, social and behavioral therapies than those *not* participating in MAT. And individuals who participate in MAT for at least one to two years have the highest rates of long-term treatment success.

Challenging The Myths

MAT is an evidence-based therapy, meaning it is backed by science as a clinically effective medical intervention. Yet, despite decades of evidence proving its efficacy and safety, myths about MAT persist:

Myth: Using medication to treat addiction is just trading one drug for another.

Fact: MAT uses safe, FDA-approved medications that are administered in therapeutic doses to help overcome addiction and the use of dangerous substances. When appropriately prescribed, these medications reduce cravings and prevent a recurrence of symptoms without causing a high. They keep withdrawal symptoms at bay. And according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), when provided at the proper dose have no adverse effects on a person's intelligence, mental capability, physical functioning, or employability.

Myth: MAT increases the risk of overdose.

Fact: MAT has been shown to decrease the incidence of relapse and overdose for individuals navigating recovery. The goal of supplementing therapy with medication is to eliminate the use of substances that lead to overdose.

Myth: MAT is expensive for the patient and not covered by insurance.

Fact: Most Medicaid, Medicare and private insurance plans do cover MAT, though prior authorization may be required.

Myth: Medications used in MAT should only be used short-term.

Fact: Every patient is different. Research shows that the longer a patient is engaged in MAT, the better their rate of long-term success. However, doctors work with each individual to determine treatment goals and length of treatment based on things like the severity of the addiction. The ongoing use of medication for the treatment of SUD is similar to taking long-term medication to control high blood pressure or regulate blood sugar.

Business Operations Around MAT

It's important for recovery-supportive employers to understand SUD as a medical condition, value MAT as a viable treatment approach and be sensitive to the rights of employees around the appropriate use of medications to boost treatment outcomes. But at the same time, prescription medications – whether related to MAT or other medical treatments – can have serious side effects that could interfere with an employee's ability to perform their job. With that, employers need sound business operations to ensure medication use does not jeopardize the safety and productivity of the employee or the workplace.

Establishing a drug responsible work culture – including the implementation of a drug-free workplace (DFWP) policy and program – is critical in preventing and responding to problems related to an employee's use of prescription medication, including those taken in MAT. Elements of a comprehensive program include

Policy & Operations

Employers need to have a sound prescription drug rule that both protects the rights of an employee around taking medications (per the Americans with Disabilities Act) and of employers

to have a safe and productive workplace. A solid rule should inform employees of their responsibilities when taking a prescription medication (i.e., asking the prescriber about potential side effects and working with their employer if the drug could pose a safety risk) and outline what actions an employer may take if there are performance concerns (e.g., removing the employee from safety-sensitive functions or asking for a fitness-for-duty exam).

Drug Testing Practices

Testing is an effective tool in preventing and identifying substance misuse. This is especially true with employees in recovery, as the thought of being tested might be that extra incentive to stay the course. To that end, many employers choose to include random testing and follow-up (to treatment) testing in their policies. But it's important to include a Medical Review Officer (MRO) in the testing process to protect an employee's right to use legally prescribed medications. This is especially important when it comes to MAT. If a drug is found in an employee's system, an MRO will verify if the drug is being taken legally and appropriately and, if so, rules the test "negative." And remember, a drug used in MAT is a *legitimate* medication for a *legitimate* medical condition. Just as an employer would not discriminate against someone for taking medications for heart disease, an employee prescribed medications for addiction must receive the same consideration.

Education and Training

Annual employee education around your DFWP policy/program can help establish a positive workplace culture around alcohol and other drug prevention and treatment and assure employees remember the expectations regarding prescription drug use. Additionally, training supervisors and managers to use the tools and resources available in your DFWP policy/program to respond to on-the-job performance and behavior issues is critical. In instances where an employee's fitness for duty is in question (i.e., extreme drowsiness, difficulty concentrating, confusion) or there are performance concerns (i.e., absenteeism, declining skills, accidents), management must be able to intervene and use policy/program-based tools to address it. These include utilizing an employee assistance program (EAP) for assessment and counseling services, applying drug testing to determine if medications are being taken appropriately, or adjusting an employee's job duties to accommodate medication use.

Assistance

Employers also need to have resources to help an employee who self-identifies they are struggling or is identified by management (or via a positive test) that there's an issue. An EAP, for example, provides employers with the resources needed to remain focused on business while offering support to employees who may need it. Employers are not expected to diagnose or counsel employees related to their medical conditions or prescription needs. Their role is to maintain workplace safety and to be aware of problematic physical, behavioral or work performance issues and use available resources to course correct. An EAP or community-based helping resource are options employers can use for assistance when issues occur.

It Just Makes Sense

Employees have the right to take prescription medications and balanced with that is an employer's right to maintain a safe and productive work environment. Yet, the stigma associated with MAT can obscure employee rights and employer obligations and cause employers to make decisions based on unfounded



assumptions, stereotypes and myths versus responding to *this* disease similar to other chronic medical conditions.

Employers can rely on sound practices and policies and utilize workplace tools and resources in their decisions related to hiring, disciplining and determining an employee's fitness for duty. This ensures a safe work environment while, at the same time, protecting employees' rights to use legally prescribed medications.

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