

Addiction

If a learner shows signs of addiction or high-risk drug abuse behaviour in the company, it is your responsibility as a VET trainer to react immediately. The “Addiction” fact sheet contains the most important information. You will learn what is called addictive behaviour, how to proceed and what preventive measures you can take.



There is a particularly high risk of young people succumbing to addiction

Why is this so?

Young people go through many changes when they grow up, on a physical, psychological and social level.

A person's brain does not fully mature until around the **age of 25**. During this phase, the ability to control oneself is still limited. Young people therefore find it harder to control themselves, assess the long-term consequences or regulate their emotions than people over the age of 25.

In addition, young people are looking for their “me,” their own identity. They also have a growing need for social recognition. In order to gain this recognition, they often emulate others; this can lead to risky behaviour (e.g. substance use).

Such transitions with new demands, roles and expectations can be very challenging and trigger cause stress. As the brain matures and the demands placed on young people by the environment increase, the risk of developing a mental illness, such as depression or anxiety and panic disorders, also rises.

The use of psychoactive substances – substances that change the function of the brain and affect consciousness, perception and feeling – or the uncontrolled use of digital media, which also affect the reward system in the brain, can provide short-term relief from stress and psychological symptoms.

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What is the difference between recreational use and problematic use?

The use of psychoactive substances or digital media alone does not have to be a problem. However, it is not always easy to tell when substance use becomes critical.

The following comparison provides an indication of when usage becomes problematic:

Casual , experimental use	Possible problematic use
– Occasional – Getting to know the state of intoxication – Together in a group of friends – Small amounts – Use is not particularly important – Minimal investment of time and money	– Regular, with increasing frequency – Increasing use alone, social withdrawal – Strong craving for substance/behaviour – Higher dose – Increasing loss of control – Neglects interests – Use becomes a fixed part of daily life – Mixed and multi-substance use – Use as a coping strategy

Problematic use does not mean that someone is addicted.

An addiction develops gradually and the process is often difficult to recognise at first, both for the affected person and those around them.

Addiction is a disease associated with changes in the brain's structure and function. It manifests itself in a strong craving and loss of control and can only be diagnosed during a thorough medical or psychotherapeutic consultation.

Addiction can affect people of all ages and from all social and cultural backgrounds.

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Establishment of addiction prevention measures in the company

If it does not already exist, it is recommended that the topic of workplace addiction prevention be incorporated in the **operational concept** or integrated into an existing occupational health management (OHM) program. Addiction prevention centres can provide specialist support in this regard.

[Please see the link on page 8.](#)

The aim of workplace addiction prevention is to **identify and reduce risk factors and strengthen protective factors**.

There follows an overview of possible risk factors:

Work assignments

- Excessive workload or undemanding tasks, unclear requirements
- Lack of support at work
- Monotonous, pointless tasks

Working atmosphere

- Lack of appreciation, hostility
- Competitiveness and conflicts
- Frustration and dissatisfaction
- Loneliness and isolation in the workplace

Consumer culture

- Negative role models
- Lack of guidelines
- Easy access to alcohol or medications

Possible protective factors that need to be strengthened

How can companies, managers, VET trainers and employees contribute to creating healthy working conditions?

Protective factors***Promote meaningful work assignments***

- Define competencies
- Regular feedback sessions so that learners can realistically assess their own development and progress
- Close collaboration between VET school and host company
- Making it possible to experience the feeling of making a difference
- Encourage personal initiative through creative opportunities in day-to-day work

Create a positive working atmosphere

- Corporate culture: Jointly define and exemplify positive values
- Fairness (among employees and learners, but also between the company and learners, e.g. fair and regular working hours)
- Promote social relationships, for example through shared break rooms, joint activities such as team days, etc.
- Focus on the strengths of the learners
- Acknowledge good work, express appreciation

Responsible consumer culture

- Existing addiction prevention program incorporated in the operating concept
- Offers for reducing personal use
- Limited access to addictive substances (e.g. alcohol, medication)
- Offer non-alcoholic alternatives at receptions and clearly state that minors are not permitted to consume alcohol or tobacco.

- Access to address lists of specialist addiction centres and offers with further information
- Clearly communicated and transparent guidelines on the use of psychoactive substances and digital media in the workplace
- Serve as a role model: Young people learn a lot from the adults in their lives, including how to deal with recreational drugs, addictive substances, and medications

Early detection and early intervention

The sooner high-risk substance use or an addiction is recognised and addressed, the better the chances of positive change.

Early detection

What unusual behaviour can you look out for in the learner?

Early warning signs:

Absences	Quality and performance	Behaviour	Manner and appearance
Unexcused absences	Deterioration in the quality of work	Difficulty concentrating	Does not pay attention to hygiene
Several short absences	Mistakes	Mood swings	Substance-specific symptoms (e.g. alcohol smell)
Long breaks	Drop in performance	Social withdrawal	Fatigue
Late for work	Failure to act / meet deadlines	A decline in interest and motivation	Weight gain or loss
Absence after days off	Increase in incidents / accidents		Uncertain gait, fine motor skills issues
Lack of punctuality	Complaints from colleagues, superiors and clients		Personal hygiene

None of these symptoms are evidence of high-risk substance use or addiction, but may also have other causes.

If learners shown any unusual behaviour or changes, it is important to discuss these issues in a conversation.

Early intervention

If an in-house concept or guidelines for addiction prevention exist, the procedure should be coordinated accordingly.

Procedure in the event of changes in behaviour

As an in-company VET trainer, be alert if a learner starts to act differently, behaves differently or if there is a decline in their work performance.

Act promptly. Document all changes and noticeable issues in writing so that you can describe them as specifically as possible in discussions. Do not violate the **privacy** of the person concerned (e.g. by searching through their personal belongings).

What to do in the event of an incident

If a learner is clearly under the influence of substances at work, immediate action must be taken. The primary objective is to ensure that they do not endanger themselves or others.

The learner should be approached immediately about their condition. Schedule a meeting to discuss the matter in detail and set a specific date and time if possible. If the learner is no longer fit for work, make sure they get home safely. In the case of minors, the parents or legal representatives must be informed immediately.

Conducting conversations

Preparing for the meeting

Be sure to prepare well for the conversation if you suspect problematic substance use (psycho-active substances, excessive gaming, etc.).

Tips for preparing for the meeting

Points to consider in the talks:

- Write down what you value about the learner.
- What behaviour or circumstances are giving you cause for concern?
- What is your goal for the conversation?
- How can you deal with possible reactions: downplaying, denying, justifying, refusing to talk, anger, sadness, tears ...?
- What will the consequences be if the learner does not change their behaviour?
- Which advice centres/support services can you recommend?

Tips for conducting conversations

Keep the following points in mind to ensure the conversation is productive:

- Remain friendly and **express your appreciation**.
- The talks should focus primarily on concerns regarding the learner, their work performance and their behaviour in a professional setting. If the learner does not mention the topic of “substance use” themselves, it should only be addressed if there are specific issues.
- If there is a strong suspicion of problematic substance use (e.g. smell of alcohol), this should be addressed. If it is possible to talk openly about high-risk substance use, the learner's overall situation should always be taken into account and help should be offered.
- **Focus on the changes and unusual behaviour you have observed**.
- If there are problems with the work performance: State clearly what needs to be improved.
- **Provide space for the learner's perspective and any concerns or questions they may have.**

- Ask the learner how they see the work assignments, the working atmosphere and the consumer culture in the company and what improvements they would like to see.
- Ask the learner what support you can offer them in their work.
- Let them know about offers of assistance (e.g. external counselling).
- At the end of the meeting, summarize the most important points. Please state explicitly once again what the learner needs to change. Arrange a follow-up meeting in two to three weeks and make it clear that you are paying close attention to the learner's behaviour.
- If the learner displays a defensive reaction, return to the changes you have observed in their behaviour and performance.
- End the conversation with appreciative words and pledge your support once again.

Principles

Follow these principles to increase the chance of a productive conversation:

1 Transparency

Communicate your expectations of the learner clearly from the outset. Build trust by communicating openly about the situation and the procedure. Make sure the learner knows exactly where they stand. Clear and honest information promotes a constructive dialogue.

2 Commitment and consistent action

Agreements should be clearly worded and adhered to. Consistent action shows the learner that you take them and the subject seriously.

Let it be known that the company is open to suggestions for improvement with regard to work assignments, working atmosphere and responsible consumer culture. Take feedback seriously. Adaptations to the needs of learners not only have an immediate impact, but also serve as preventive measures for future learners.

3 Continuity

Regular talks and constant support are crucial in order to monitor developments and build trust. They foster a stable relationship and continuous support.

4 An understanding of the situation

Try to understand the personal and professional challenges of the learner. Empathy and understanding make it easier to connect and encourage openness.

5 A focus on care

The well-being of the learner should always take priority. Encourage the learner to seek support in the event of difficulties; give them the time they need.

6 An awareness of one's own role

Remember that you have an important function as a role model and mentor. Your attitude and behaviour have a major impact on the learners.

7 Prevent learners from dropping out

The goal should always be to ensure that the training continues and to prevent learners from dropping out. Early support helps to overcome difficult situations.

8 Know your own limits

It is important that you are aware of your limitations and recognise when internal/external help is needed. Not every challenge can be tackled alone.

9 Involve specialists

If the situation becomes more complex, do not hesitate to call in experts. They will support you and help you find good solutions.

Next steps

Stay in touch

Meet up with the learner on a regular basis to assess their progress together. Provide close supervision to ensure that the learner receives the support they need (e.g. in the areas of work, school, psychological support, etc.). If there is no improvement in performance, quality of work or conduct at the workplace, the written agreements must be strictly enforced.

Involvement of the supporting network

If the agreed objectives are not achieved within the agreed deadline, you should involve the learner's wider support network (supervisor, legal representative, VET office).

Structured approach

List the issues from the perspective of everyone involved.

- Draw up a step-by-step plan (minimum requirements for the learner and support from the host company).
- Define the consequences in the event that the agreements are not kept (reporting the matter to the senior management, transfer to a less hazardous workplace, termination of the apprenticeship contract).
- Ensure that the measures are regularly reviewed together with the learner.

Primary objective

Vocational education and training should be continued wherever possible.

Legal situation

The Employment Act (EmpA Art. 32 para. 1) stipulates that a company must protect the health of its employees; any risk to the health of learners under the age of 18 must be reported to their parents or legal representatives.

Under the Employment Act (EmpA Art. 29 to 32) and the Swiss Code of Obligations (CO Art. 328), the person in charge of the learners is responsible for protecting the physical and mental health of the young people.

Employees may not put themselves or others at risk. This applies in particular to the consumption of alcoholic beverages or other intoxicating substances (APO Art. 11 Para. 3).



Legal basis

EmpA Art. 32 para. 1, Employment Act (Federal Act of 13 March 1964 on Employment in Business, Trade and Industry, SR 822.11)

EmpA Art. 29 et seq., Employment Act (Federal Act of 13 March 1964 on Employment in Business, Trade and Industry, SR 822.11)

CO Art. 328, Swiss Code of Obligations (Federal Act of 30 March 1911 on the Amendment of the Swiss Civil Code, SR 220)

APO Art. 11 Para. 3, Accident Prevention Ordinance (Ordinance of December 19, 1983 on the Prevention of Accidents and Occupational Illnesses, SR 832.30)

(Laws can be accessed with SR numbers at: → fedlex.admin.ch)



Important links

→ vocationaleducation.ch/addresses

List of cantonal VET offices. Point of contact for initial information and referral to specialist units.

→ vocationaleducation.ch/glossary

All important VET terms are described in short and informative texts.

→ infodrog.ch

Swiss Coordination and Specialist Centre for Addiction

→ Prev@Work

A programme aimed at young adults in education and their immediate professional environment.

→ safezone.ch

Online advice on addiction issues

→ suchtfachstelle.zuerich

Addiction Centre Zurich

→ suchtschweiz.ch

Addicts Switzerland

→ suchtindex.ch

Addiction support offers in Switzerland

→ sucht-und-arbeitswelt.ch

Quick links to training resources on addiction with a focus on vocational education and training

→ sucht-und-arbeitswelt.ch

Addiction prevention centres providing professional support (e.g. for addiction prevention within the company), listed by canton

→ zackstark.ch

Project “Zackstark – smoke-free through the apprenticeship”



Further literature

→ [suchtfachstelle.zuerich](https://www.suchtfachstelle.zuerich.ch)

Zurich Addiction Centre, fact sheet: what to do in the event of an acute incident (in German)

→ bag.admin.ch/en

Brochure: The HAND Method – Supporting Young People in Crisis Situations, GREY Youth Platform, 2025 (in German)

→ gesundheitsfoerderung.ch

Health Promotion Switzerland, Workplace Health Management: Principles and Trends, Focus on Mental Health, 2018 (in German)

→ gesundheitsfoerderung.ch

Health Promotion Switzerland, Dealing with mentally stressed learners in the company. Part 1: Study findings, 2023 Trends, focus on mental health, 2018

→ gesundheitsfoerderung.ch

Health Promotion Switzerland, Dealing with mentally stressed learners in the company. Part 2: Recommendations for action, 2023

→ pabst.publishers.com

Schmid Otto, Thomas Müller, Die Sucht-Enzyklopädie Addictionary (in German), Lengerich, 2020, Pabst Science Publisher

→ suchtpraevention-zh.ch

Addiction prevention in apprenticeships: a guide for VET trainers (in German), Zurich, 2024, Education Department of the Canton of Zurich Secondary School and Vocational Education Office



Source

Schmocker, B. et al. (2022). Dealing with mentally stressed apprentices - A survey of VET trainers in German-speaking Switzerland. Binningen: WorkMed. → edudoc.ch

Addiction prevention in apprenticeships: a successful journey through the apprenticeship (in German), Zurich, Second edition 2024, Suchtfachstelle Zürich → bgm-zh.ch

Developed by the Prevention Department team, Zurich Addiction Centre → [suchtfachstelle.zuerich](https://www.suchtfachstelle.zuerich.ch)

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This and other fact sheets can be found at:

→ vocationaleducation.ch/factsheets

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