

★ Addiction is everybody's business

Addiction affects so many of us in the community, and specialist services can only see the tip of the iceberg. Anna Nelson reviews the literature on barriers to employment for people who use drugs problematically and also how being in employment can enhance recovery.



Serious alcohol and other drug problems affect approximately 3.5 percent of the total population (National Committee for Addiction Treatment, 2011) however specialist addiction services see less than 30% of this group. Many more, experience problematic or harmful use of substances and all of these people have family, whānau and friends who may also be experiencing challenges as a result of their loved one's substance use. Addiction is everybody's business because it affects so many of us in the community, and specialist services can only see the tip of the iceberg.

The benefits of work to mental and physical health and the harmful effects of unemployment are now both widely recognised. Yet people who experience problematic substance use, once unemployed, face multiple barriers to returning to work, and as a result their employment rate is well below that of the general population.

People who use drugs problematically are significantly less likely to be employed compared to other adults of working age (MacDonald and Pudney, 2001, 2002 cited in Bauld, Hay, McKell and Carroll, 2010b). Analysis of the Dunedin longitudinal cohort found a significant relationship between cannabis use at ages 14-21 and low educational attainment and unemployment in later life (Fergusson and Boden, 2008). Studies also suggest that the more drugs a person uses the longer they will spend unemployed (Plant and Plant, 1986 cited in Bauld et al., 2010a). According to Bauld et al. (2010a) when people with problematic drug use are employed it is often in low paid and short term jobs, which can be a deterrent to working if people are used to more lucrative illegal activity.

The links between problematic alcohol use and employment appear more complex. There is evidence to suggest that the amount of alcohol a person drinks, alcohol dependency and the physical health problems that may result from drinking, damage employment prospects (Bauld et al, 2010a). However there are also studies that suggest that alcohol use is more likely to become problematic during unemployment (Bauld et al., 2010b) and others that suggest that 'alcohol misuse' has no impact on employment (Schmidt, Zabkiewicz, Jacobs, and Wiley, 2007; Feng, Zhou, Butler, Booth and French, 2001).

One regional New Zealand study found that 43% of the alcohol and drug service users they surveyed were unemployed or not working due to health issues (Counties Manukau AOD Sector Collaboration Group, 2013). This is not surprising given the number of barriers that people who are or have been problematic substance users experience. According to Sutton, Celbulla, Heaver and Smith (2004) the barriers to employment that drug and alcohol users experience are lack of education and skills; health; social disadvantage; poor provision of support services; low levels of engagement with employers and support professionals, and dealing with stigma. This study also recognised that co-existing mental health problems and an offending history were also

significant barriers. Disclosure of addiction issues and criminal offending were also two of the major barriers identified by individuals accessing addiction services in the New Zealand study, as a high proportion of the treatment population in this study were people on probation (Counties Manukau AOD Sector Collaboration Group, 2013).

Being in employment can enhance recovery, improve symptoms and adherence to treatment and prevent relapse (Burns, Catty and Becker, 2009; NTA, 2012). Employment is therefore often part of recovery. Having a job offers much more than structure to one's day, it also provides meaningful goals, self-esteem, finances, access to a different social network, and other changes that help many people to develop hope, change their self-image, and envisage a different life (Jahoda, 1982). Individuals who are currently dependent on alcohol or other drugs often reduce their use or become motivated to try to abstain when they have a job. (Mueser, Noordsy, Drake and Fox 2003). In this way, most studies have found that employment can moderate relapse and assist treatment retention (Walls, Moore, Batiste and Loy, 2009; Keane, 2007; Magura, 2003; Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2000; Godley, Passetti, and White, 2006).

Conversely it is also acknowledged that unemployment is a risk factor for the development or exacerbation of problematic substance use and mental health problems (Mueser et al, 2003; Marmot & Bell, 2009).

The evidence shows us that working with people experiencing problematic substance use in a non-judgemental and respectful way towards finding employment is likely to increase their overall wellbeing. Can addiction be your business?

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Matua Raki are the national addiction workforce development centre. Anna is a registered social worker with a long-standing involvement in the addiction sector both in New Zealand and in the UK. She has also been a Dapaanz (the professional body and registration board for addiction practitioners) board member since 2015.

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