

## **TOOLBOX TALK #6**

### **RECOGNIZING ON-THE-JOB IMPAIRMENT**

When you hear the words “impairment at work,” alcohol or substance abuse likely comes to mind. But according to the Canadian Center for Occupational Health and Safety, impairment encompasses much more. “Issues that may distract a person from focusing on their tasks include those that are related to family or relationship problems, fatigue (mental or physical), traumatic shock, or medical conditions or treatments,” CCOHS states.

Other ways a worker can be impaired include experiencing harassment or bullying, having an unresolved problem with a co-worker, or being distracted by a non-work-related event, such as planning a wedding.

If an employee is experiencing impairment, his or her ability to work safely could be compromised by diminishing cognitive abilities and judgment. The worker may exhibit erratic behavior, such as overreacting to criticism or being confrontational. If the employee’s impairment is because of alcohol-related issues, he or she may slur words, have an unsteady gait or smell of alcohol. The impaired worker may consistently be late, show a reduction in productivity or quality of work, or work in an unsafe manner.

#### **What to do?**

CCOHS recommends educating workers on recognizing the signs and symptoms of impairment, and knowing how to report concerns to a supervisor. Likewise, once a supervisor has been alerted that a worker is showing signs of impairment, he or she must take action right away. CCOHS recommends:

- Taking the employee to a private area to discuss concerning behavior. (If the worker needs help right away, go to the nearest emergency room or call 911.)
- Having another supervisor or designated person be present as a witness.
- Making sure the worker knows you’re not there to judge, and that you’re concerned about his or her safety and the safety of others. Reassure the worker that everything will be kept confidential. Then, ask the worker to explain what’s going on.

Depending on the situation, you’ll need to discuss the next steps. Follow your organization’s impairment policy. If necessary, notify senior management or a union representative of the situation.

It helps to be familiar with resources that can help affected workers, such as an Employee Assistance Program. Encourage use of all available support programs, and help the worker seek treatment, if possible.

Does the worker need to leave the jobsite? If so, call a taxi or arrange an escort home – don’t allow the worker to drive.