

Considering a Career in the Substance Abuse Field Frequently Asked Questions

► **How do salaries in the substance abuse treatment field compare with other sectors?**

It is not possible to provide a simple answer to this question because salaries vary among and within regions. Major employers tend to offer higher salaries that are competitive with those in other human service fields. While smaller agencies often pay less than larger organizations, many practitioners value the opportunity to work more closely with clinical teams and fewer clients overall.

► **Are there any risks associated with working directly with people who have substance abuse problems?**

Staff safety is a concern in all human service agencies, including those that serve people with substance abuse problems. To this end, all conscientious employers do develop plans and procedures to minimize client-related and other risks to staff. These plans may influence the design of buildings and offices, staffing levels, staff training and emergency procedures.

► **Can I work as an addictions counsellor if I have a personal history of substance abuse?**

Yes, you can work as an addictions counsellor if you have a personal history of substance abuse. Many people with a history of substance abuse are making valuable contributions to all sectors of the substance abuse field. Some employers consider recovery from substance abuse an asset when hiring support workers and counsellors. In these cases, a minimum of two years of continuous sobriety is usually required prior to being hired. However, personal recovery from substance abuse does not guarantee that you will be a more effective counsellor than someone who has not had this experience. You will also need education, training and demonstrable competence in the practice of substance abuse counselling.

► **Must I give up smoking and drinking if I work in a treatment agency?**

You generally do not have to give up smoking and drinking when working in a treatment agency. Many treatment agencies are committed to addressing a broad range of problematic health issues, including cigarette smoking. To this end, smoking cessation programs and "no smoking" policies are being implemented in many treatment programs, with possible implications for staff members as well as clients. Staff members with a history of substance abuse may be required to sign a contract to maintain complete abstinence from alcohol and other drugs while employed and other staff who drink excessively during or after work hours may be asked to enter treatment or leave their jobs. Any use of illegal drugs is likely to result in immediate dismissal.

▶ **How is confidentiality handled in the substance abuse field?**

Confidentiality is a major issue in substance abuse treatment settings and all employees of treatment agencies are legally and ethically bound to treat all information on clients as confidential. However, there are instances when counsellors are legally required to share information about their clients; specifically, this happens when there is a search warrant, subpoena, or other court order and when there is evidence of child abuse. Confidentiality also does not apply if clients report that they intend to harm themselves or others.

▶ **What kind of educational background does a substance abuse specialist require?**

Support workers (attendants, outreach workers, needle exchange workers) typically require a community college certificate in the human services field or a bachelor's degree in social work, psychology or a related discipline. The educational requirements for counsellors (also known as therapists) are generally higher than those for support workers, with the majority of agencies requiring at least a bachelor's degree and many requiring a master's degree in social work, psychology or a related discipline. Clinical and executive directors typically require the highest level of education, with a minimum requirement of a master's degree in the human service field or business administration, respectively.