

Domestic Violence and the Workplace

I thought if it was a domestic problem, it was none of our business. I learned domestic violence follows the victim to work.”– Human Resources Manager

INFORMATION FOR MANAGERS/CO-WORKERS

Employment sabotage is a major controlling behavior tactic used by abusive partners.

In the US, 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men will experience physical or sexual violence or stalking by a partner during their lifetime. Domestic abuse at home may impact an employee in the workplace with tardiness, absenteeism, decreased productivity, safety issues, increased turnover/recruitment and increased healthcare costs, losing an average of 7.2 work days/yr. If unrecognized and unsupported, up to 50% of these employees end up losing their jobs. Work productivity losses alone from domestic violence cost US businesses annually \$8.3 billion dollars.¹

Recognizing a possible abusive home relationship in an employee (look for patterns):

- Obvious injuries such as bruises attributed to “falls” or non-convincing explanations, possibly partially hidden by make-up or inappropriate clothing for weather (long sleeves or turtlenecks)
- New or worsening health issues, especially headaches, chronic pain, fatigue, or vague symptoms
- Uncharacteristic lateness or absenteeism
- Change in attitude, job performance or productivity - including poor concentration, errors, slowness, missing deadlines, inconsistent work quality, poor personal interactions
- Uncharacteristic irritability, tearfulness, anxiety, easily startled, hyper-vigilant
- Physical appearance may become sloppy, disheveled
- Self-isolation from others, unusual quietness
- Multiple requests for special accommodations, such as leaving early
- Unusual number of phone calls or emails from a current or former partner, with employee responding with strong reactions or reluctance
- Disruptive personal visits to the workplace by current or former partner
- Gifts or flowers sent to employee for no apparent reason

How to ask

- In a private and confidential manner express concern - “Mary/John, I’m concerned about you.”
- State the facts - “You seem to be very tired and distracted lately, not yourself. Is there something going on you’d like to talk about?” (Do not ask if something is happening at home.)

How to respond

- Be supportive if employee declines to discuss. Respect his/her decision.
 - “You know I’m here for you, and you can talk to me at any time.”
 - Arrange for Domestic Violence (DV) resource materials to be available in your unit (ask Social Worker (SW))
- If employee discloses abuse
 - Listen non-judgmentally without trying to fix or give advice on decisions
 - Be strongly supportive “No one deserves to be treated like that.” “You are not alone.”
 - Do NOT ask “Why don’t you just leave?”, “Why did you wait so long to tell someone?”, or “Have you tried counseling?”
 - Explain strict confidentiality besides minimal information as needed to Human Resources (HR), Security
 - Guide employee to resources
 - Community DV organizations (hotline and safety sheets available from SW or at <http://domesticabuse.stanford.edu/quick.html>)
 - Employee and Labor Relations, Employee Assistance Program, Security, HR
 - Ask if he/she needs to take time off or adjust work
 - Ask if he/she is afraid for their immediate safety
 - If yes, contact SW and local domestic violence hotline from office
 - If no, let them know to contact you with any future safety concerns

“Your 4 messages should be”¹:

- I am concerned for you and I support you.
- I will keep this information in the strictest confidence.
- I think you should consider seeking assistance from an advocate. Here are some referrals that may help you.
- I am available to help with work issues, if you need assistance.

Consider adjusting work

Research has shown that employment helps employees experiencing violence at home by improving their finances, promoting physical safety, increasing self-esteem, improving social connectedness, and providing mental respite and motivation/purpose. Continue to communicate clear and consistent performance expectations. Reasonable work accommodations may include:

- Temporary changes in job responsibilities, schedule or even location.
- Encourage the employee to let you know in advance if he/she can't meet a deadline or can't handle a specific job function.
- Temporarily adjust performance expectations.

Safety planning

“The goal is to create a workplace where employees feel comfortable seeking assistance without fear of retribution, which can keep employees from coming forward until it is too late with information critical to ensuring the safety of all workers.”¹ Ask employee about changes that might help him/her feel safer. Some options for you both to consider:

- Obtaining a restraining order that encompasses the workplace
- Discuss with Security:
 - Copy of restraining order and photo of abuser
 - Keep copies of threatening phone calls, text messages, social media postings or emails
 - Develop a safety plan after a workplace safety assessment, including possible escort to and from car/public transit and/or moving work station to a less public area
- Can phone calls be screened?
- Do not provide information over the phone that would help locate employee or indicate schedule
- Ask employee for an emergency contact in case he/she is unreachable

Employee rights

The Domestic Violence Employment Leave Act (DVELA) mandates that employees be allowed to take unpaid time off without retaliation or discrimination to deal with issues relating to domestic violence, including appearing in court, seeking medical treatment or legal advice and arranging for safe housing. (Ref: PTO and Other Time Off Policy, Employee Attendance/Tardiness Compliance Policy, or Workplace Violence Policy.) You may ask for supporting documentation.

Further resources

- **Workplaces Respond to Domestic and Sexual Violence: A National Resource Center¹**
Funded by the US Dept. of Justice Office on Violence Against Women, contains information on the benefit of providing effective workplace responses to victims of domestic violence, sexual violence and stalking – comprehensive materials, policy template, implementation toolkit.
<http://www.workplacesrespond.org/>
Practice talking to a virtual employee -
<http://www.workplacesrespond.org/implement/education-and-training/interact>
- **Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence**
National organization founded in 1995 by business leaders – extensive articles and resources.
<http://www.caepv.org/>
- **Domestic Violence Cost Calculator**
Calculate costs of domestic violence to your department (in 2003 dollars)
<http://www.texashealth.org/body.cfm?id=1848>