

How Does Domestic Violence Impact YOUR Workplace?

By Sandra Molinari

It might surprise you to learn that homicide is the leading cause of death on the job for women in the United States.¹ Or, did you know that nearly 8 million paid workdays were lost due to domestic violence in 2003? That's the equivalent of 32,000 full-time jobs!²

As a result, it is of the utmost importance that employers address the issue of domestic violence among their employees. Not only does domestic violence have a negative impact on a company's financial performance, but it also causes both victims and other employees to suffer undue stress and low morale. Ignoring the problem also poses serious security risks, and therefore liability concerns for the employer.

In this article I'll describe how domestic violence manifests itself in the workplace, briefly outline steps that employers can take to address the issue, and help make their employees and workplace safer, healthier, and more productive.



Defining Domestic Violence

The term "domestic violence" refers to physical, sexual and/or psychological harm – as well as financial control and abuse – caused by a current or former partner or spouse. Domestic violence is also commonly referred to as "intimate partner violence."

❖ "About one out of three American women (31%) report being physically or sexually abused by a husband or boyfriend at some point in their lives. ..."³

❖ Women are much more likely than men to be victims of both domestic violence and on-the-job intimate partner homicide. Spouses, boyfriends/girlfriends and ex-boyfriends/ex-girlfriends were responsible for the on-the-job deaths of 321 women and 38 men from 1997-2009.⁴

❖ However, that being said, men can be victimized as well. Moreover, domestic violence occurs in both heterosexual and same-sex relationships. Therefore, I will use gender-neutral language when referring to both victims and perpetrators.

❖ Domestic violence involves the use of a multitude of tactics by one partner to control and manipulate the other. In other words, we are NOT talking about a one-time incident of physical violence between intimate partners. On the contrary, victims of domestic violence often suffer from verbal and emotional abuse on a daily basis. This includes:

- Humiliation;
- Degrading language;
- Isolation from family and friends;
- Threats; and

- Attempts to sabotage their efforts to assert their independence – such as working outside the home and having access to their own finances, which is helpful to understand in this context.

How Does Domestic Violence Manifest in the Workplace?

An abusive individual's power and control tactics are likely to manifest at the workplace in the form of repeated harassing phone calls and/or text messages to their partner, causing the victim to take frequent breaks to reply for fear of retaliation (which might include a hostile visit from the abuser). Such harassment produces great stress for the victim.

Add this to the abuse happening *outside* the workplace, and the result is employees who are fearful, anxious, depressed, and sleep-deprived, struggling to maintain their focus *in* the workplace. It's no wonder that victims are likely to experience high rates of absenteeism and tardiness.

In fact, it may be the very motivation of the abuser to sabotage their partner's job performance, cause them to lose workdays (and wages) and eventually the job altogether, thus making the victim more financially vulnerable and dependent on the abuser.

Having *perpetrators* of domestic abuse at the workplace is another cause for concern. They too tend to perform their work tasks less effectively: as mentioned previously, they are likely to spend a significant amount of time calling or texting their partners to keep tabs on them (which may include the use of company resources).

If the victim does not respond in what they consider to be a timely manner, the perpetrator becomes more distracted and dedicates even greater energy to tracking down their partner and possibly leaving the workplace to go and harass them in person.

A perpetrator's behaviors at the workplace can also become disruptive or violent – endangering *everyone's* safety – which may have public relations implications for the business.

The negative effects of domestic violence at the

workplace *are not limited to victims and perpetrators*. Concerned, empathetic co-workers may lose focus on *their own* work tasks as they seek to help a victim. As a result, *their* morale is dampened by the situation that they are witnessing, and *they* may fear for their safety.

Indeed, abusers have been known to threaten or intimidate other people (in order to obtain information about their partner), and there is always the risk that they may show up at their partner's workplace armed, threatening to hurt them, and possibly others in the process.

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Workplace Responses

It goes without saying that employers have everything to gain in addressing domestic violence in the workplace:

- Minimizing productivity losses and employee turnover;
- Maintaining a safe work environment for all employees;
- Keeping health care costs reasonable (when employees are physically and mentally healthier); and
- Showing they truly care about the well-being of their employees.

Employers have the power to create supportive and productive workplaces by putting in place practices and policies that respond to domestic violence, including:

- ❖ Adopting a protocol and implementing leave, benefit, and referral policies that address domestic violence in the workplace;



- ❖ Offering appropriate training for Human Resources staff, managers, and supervisors on the dynamics and effects of domestic violence, and how to respond to victims as well as perpetrators;

- ❖ Educating employees about domestic violence through **EAP-led** workshops, newsletters, informal brown bag lunches, etc;

- ❖ Creating a supportive work environment in which everyone feels safe disclosing abuse. This includes maintaining requests for confidential assistance, and respecting the choices of adult victims in response to the difficult situations they are experiencing. Special care should be taken to send the message that victims are NEVER responsible for the abuse they suffer;

- ❖ Informing staff who may be suffering or perpetrating domestic violence about community resources available to them (*and assuring that HR and/or EAP have updated information for employees*);

- ❖ Taking the proper security measures to ensure the safety of all employees, especially the victims. It's a good idea to work with victims to put in place *individual* safety plans;

- ❖ Holding perpetrators in the workplace accountable for their actions. It should be made clear to them that domestic violence will not be tolerated any more than other acts of violence in the workplace.

In developing an effective workplace response to domestic violence, it's a good idea to *seek out the expertise of domestic violence advocates* in one's community for additional guidance, support, and training.

Summary

In closing, I would like to acknowledge that talking about domestic violence is not easy, nor is it comfortable. Most people – and many employers – would rather just write it off as a family issue, to be dealt with by the concerned parties.

As we have seen, however, it is a widespread ill in our society, and playing the ostrich with one's head in the sand will ultimately hurt businesses and organizations. ■

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Editor's note: October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month (DVAM). For a list of DVAM activities, check out www.ncadv.org.

Article Resources

1 Loomis, Dana, "Preventing Gun Violence in the Workplace," *CRISP Report: Conducting research in Security to Practice, Alexandria, VA: ASIS International Foundation, Inc. (September 2008)*

2 *Costs of Intimate Partner Violence Against Women in the United States, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2003. Available at: www.cdc.gov/ncipc/pub-res/ipv_cost/IPVBook-Final-Feb18.pdf*

3 *Health Concerns Across a Woman's Lifespan: 1998 Survey of Women's Health. 1999. The Commonwealth Fund, New York, NY.*

4 *U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2010. Occupational Homicides by Selected Characteristics, 1997-2009. Available at: www.bls.gov/iif/oshwc/foi/work_hom.pdf*

Response Resources

The following is a list of useful resources for concerned employers to step up and do the right thing!

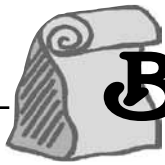
National Coalition Against Domestic Violence – www.ncadv.org

National Domestic Violence Hotline – 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

National Network to End Domestic Violence – www.nnedv.org

Safe at Work Coalition – www.safeatworkcoalition.org

Workplaces Respond to Domestic and Sexual Violence: A National Resource Center – www.workplacesrespond.org



Responding to Domestic Violence Victims with Empathy

When providing support and assistance to individuals in your workplace suffering from domestic violence (DV), make sure to go about it as supportive and empathetic allies rather than as “rescuers”.

Listen -- and believe her.

To the outsider, a victim’s story may sound exaggerated or unbelievable. No matter – if she has been courageous enough to confide in you, she really needs you to believe her, as it’s likely that no one else around her does (because her abuser has convinced everyone that she’s “crazy” or because he “seems like such a nice guy”).

Allow her to choose how much she shares.

A victim may be fearful of the repercussions of “breaking the silence” and reveal only part of her story to you. Be receptive, but do not pressure her to tell you more than she chooses; this will help her to regain some sense of control over her life and experience. Just listen and validate her feelings.

Provide confidentiality.

You may be the first or only person that she decides to confide in about her terrifying situation; for her peace of mind and safety, it’s especially important that you provide reassurances regarding the privacy of this information.

Share information and resources.

She may not know what resources exist in her community that could bring her some relief: emotional or financial support, legal remedies, shelters, etc. The National Domestic Violence Hotline is a great place to start. The number is: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) or TTY 1-800-787-3224. Encourage her to report the abuse to law enforcement if she feels safe doing so.



Ensure safety.

Help her feel safe at work by implementing proper security measures and assisting her to create her own personal safety plan.

Respect her actions and decisions.

It’s tempting to want to “rescue” a DV victim from her situation, but then we get frustrated when she makes decisions different than what we believe is best for her. We must trust that the victim is acting *in her own best interest*, as she knows well what her abuser is capable of: for example, staying with an abusive partner may be the safest option for her at this time (especially if he has threatened to harm the children or her family if she leaves). ■

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