How to Respond to Employees Facing Domestic Violence

A Workplace Handbook for Managers, Supervisors, and Co-Workers
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Introduction

The serious nature of domestic violence in the workplace warrants the attention of the employer, managers, supervisors, and office security staff. This pamphlet is intended to help managers and supervisors interact with employees who are victims of domestic violence, and to help those employees connect to needed services.

Designing an effective workplace response, including a safety plan, is crucial for everyone. It should be based on the victim’s information and inclination, as well as the capacity of the workplace.

However, to avoid a potentially dangerous situation, managers should avoid becoming overly involved in counseling the employee or offering personal favors (offering your home as shelter, giving money from petty cash, or doing impromptu safety checks at the employee’s home).

All of us respond to domestic violence in different ways. Some of us have personal experience or have helped a friend in need. Others wish to avoid the subject and are fearful of hearing the details.

Approaching an employee with your concern that they are living with domestic violence needs to be planned in advance.

Some victims will be relieved to talk about it; many more will deny it. But by starting the conversation, you will be ensuring that employees know that their workplace is a safe environment to reach out about domestic violence.

“Domestic violence is absolutely a workplace issue.

When a victim of domestic violence leaves their abuser, where is the one place the abuser knows the victim will be every day? Work.”

– Cambridge Domestic Violence Advocate
What is Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence is a pattern of behavior one person uses to gain power and control over his or her partner in an intimate relationship. Behaviors can include intimidation, threats, psychological confusion, emotional pain, verbal abuse, physical attacks, sexual assault, and homicide.

Abusive behaviors can also include periods of apologies, blaming, little or no communication, promises to change, and gifts. By changing methods and types of abusive behaviors, the perpetrator is constantly keeping his or her partner on edge and in fear.

Why is it so hard for victims to leave?

Victims stay in abusive relationships for a variety of reasons. From the outside, this may be hard to understand.

“What if I say the wrong thing?”

It’s hard to know exactly what to say, but there are some things that you should NOT say. See page 17 for specifics.

Reasons people stay

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Reason</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>The victim feels the relationship has its good points and is not all bad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>The victim hopes the relationship will change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Concerns</td>
<td>The victim does not have access to emergency funds or savings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>The victim is concerned about the well-being of her (or his) children.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>There are threats to kill or hurt the victim, the victim’s children, and/or the victim’s family if the victim leaves.</td>
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What does domestic violence look like in the workplace?

Do you think that one of your employees or colleagues may be in an abusive relationship? Here are some workplace-specific signs and symptoms. Look for a pattern, rather than a single sign or symptom.

**Signs and symptoms**

- Arriving to work late or very early
- Unplanned or increased use of Earned Time or Paid Time Off
- Decreased productivity
- Tension around receiving repeated personal phone calls
- Wearing long sleeves on a hot day or sunglasses inside
- Difficulty in making decisions alone
- Difficulty concentrating on tasks
- Avoiding windows, main entrance of office
- Repeated discussion of marital or relationship problems
- Flowers or gifts sent to employee at the workplace for no apparent reason
- Bruises, chronic headaches, abdominal pains, muscle aches
- Vague, non-specific medical complaints
- Sleeping or eating disorders
- Signs of fear, anxiety, depression
- Fatigue
- Intense startle reactions
- Suicidal or homicidal thoughts
- Nightmares or flashbacks

“Our conference room was on the first floor and one wall was all glass. I remember being in a meeting and looking out. There he was in our car just staring at me. I was so nervous. 

*I wasn’t sure what he was going to do.*

– Report from a domestic violence survivor
### Impact of domestic violence on the workplace

Domestic violence affects not only the victim, but also co-workers and the work environment itself. The effects can range from subtle to dramatic. As a manager or supervisor, it is important to be aware of these potential problems and to take steps to promote the safety of all your staff.

#### Impact on victim
- Physical and emotional health impacted
- Isolation from friends and family
- Difficulty meeting basic needs of self and family
- Absenteeism, tardiness
- Decreased concentration or job performance
- Workplace interruptions

#### Impact on co-workers
- Concern for the victim
- Fear violence will come to the workplace
- Concern for personal safety
- Negative impact on workplace interpersonal relationships
- Productivity decreases, work stops
- Resentment toward the victim (additional work falls to co-workers, perceived special treatment from manager)
- Trauma from witnessing the violence

#### Impact on organization
- Compromised safety in the organization
- Increased threat of violence
- Increased health care costs
- Turnover and recruitment costs
- Productivity decreases, work stops
Plan for Managers

If an employee is in imminent danger or is requesting immediate assistance, call 911 and company security (if available) immediately.

If an employee tells you that she (or he) is in an abusive relationship:

1. Communicate your concerns for the employee’s safety. Communicate that you are concerned for the safety of the employee’s children, if there are any.

2. Tell the employee that you believe her (or him) and that what is happening is wrong. No one deserves to be hurt. (The abuser may be blaming the victim by saying, “You made me do it, it’s your fault.”)

3. Tell the employee that the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can help with counseling and safety planning, based on the wishes and needs of the employee. These services are free and confidential. If the employee chooses not to use the EAP, tell the employee that you are concerned for her (or his) safety and refer her (or him) to other community resources.

4. Be clear that your role is to try to help and not to judge. The employee needs to know that someone cares, will listen, and can help her (or him) find the right resources.

5. Managers can consult with the EAP, whose staff has expertise in counseling people who are living with domestic violence and can refer them to services.

6. Managers who are feeling confused or overwhelmed can discuss their concerns about the employee’s situation confidentially with the EAP. They can also consult with security staff if there is a concern about workplace safety, and with Human Resources regarding Earned Time or Paid Time Off, leaves, or performance issues. Do not discuss the employee’s situation with anyone else without permission from the employee.

“I didn’t realize it was our problem, too.

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
Specific Ways You Can Help

It is important to ask the victim what changes could be made to make her (or him) feel safer. Remember, the victim knows the perpetrator better than anyone else.

Encourage the employee to save any threatening e-mail or voice-mail messages. These can potentially be used for future legal action, or can serve as evidence of violating an existing restraining order.

Ask the employee to name an emergency contact person in case the employee is missing or unreachable.

Designate a code word or phrase so the employee can alert you to danger.

Is the employee’s workstation away from public access, stairs, and elevators? If not, can it be moved? Can barriers such as plants or a file cabinet be placed between the entrance and the victim's workstation?

Can the employee be given priority parking near the building with a security escort from the car?

Can someone walk with the employee to the car or public transit stop? Are there any car pools in her (or his) residential area?

How can phone calls be screened? Can the employee’s phone number be changed? Can caller ID be installed in the employee’s work unit?

Can the employee’s name and number be removed from automated phone messages or directories?

Don't give out any personal information to others. Perpetrators often have excellent skills in obtaining information from co-workers.

Make sure the employee knows the specifics of your workplace policy and how to report any incident. Does the policy cover threats over the telephone? Does it cover non-employees, as well as employees? Is there a specific telephone number to call?

If needed and possible, rework the employee’s work assignment or schedule. Follow up to see how the employee is doing with the new arrangement. Ask general questions such as “How are you doing?” or “How are things going?”

Respect the employee’s privacy, even if you think she (or he) is still in an abusive relationship. Maintain your relationship as manager or supervisor, not as counselor.

To avoid arousing an abuser’s suspicion, an employee may want to seek help during the workday. If possible, rearrange the work schedule so that there is time during lunch or breaks.
Legal Issues

As a supervisor with no experience in domestic violence issues in the workplace, you may be wondering if this issue exposes your company to legal liability. In some cases, it could.

Domestic violence may raise legal issues in a variety of circumstances. A batterer may stalk or assault his or her partner or others in the workplace. Or abuse may occur between two co-workers in a dating or marital relationship.

Establishing a policy, enacting procedures, creating a network of resources, and insisting on a culture that is intolerant of violence in any form is not only good business – it could save a life.

Several laws apply:

• Occupational health and safety laws generally require employers to maintain a safe workplace, which may include a violence-free workplace.

• Family and medical leave laws may require employers to grant leave to employees who are coping with domestic violence situations.

• Victim assistance laws may prohibit employers from taking adverse job actions against women who disclose their situation or who take time off from their jobs to make court appearances.

• Under certain circumstances, acts of violence against a woman may constitute a form of sexual harassment, which may violate federal or state anti-discrimination laws. This is true if the abusive partner creates a hostile environment at the workplace and the company knowingly fails to take reasonable corrective action, such as informing security personnel of the problem and instructing them to take appropriate steps.
Guidelines for Employees

Are you worried about your co-worker, friend, or relative who may be in an emotionally or physically abusive relationship? There are ways you can be supportive. Safety is the priority at all times.

**Do ask...**

- Is someone hurting you?
- Did someone hurt you?
- Are you afraid of your partner?
- Has your partner ever hit (kicked, hurt) you?
- I have a friend whose partner tries to control everything they do. Is this happening to you?
- Is there someone from a previous relationship who is making you feel unsafe now?

**You can say...**

- I believe you.
- You are not alone. There are many people who have gone through this.
- I care about you, and I know how hard it is to talk about this.
- You don’t deserve to be hurt, you’ve done nothing wrong, this is not your fault.
- What is happening is wrong.
- You know best what your partner may do. It’s always best to have a plan in place.
- I can give you a number to call for help and advice.
- You are not alone. How can I help you?

**What not to say...**

- Why don’t you just leave?
- Why did you return to your partner?
- What did you do to provoke your partner?
- Why did you wait so long to tell someone?

**Also...**

- Don’t use labels (“You’re crazy to stay with your partner.”).
- Don’t tell the person what to do.
- Don’t discuss the person’s information with anyone else without her (or his) permission.
If You Are a Victim of Domestic Violence

Everyone has experienced tension in his or her relationships, yet most relationships are not abusive. Domestic violence is not a disagreement, a marital spat, or an anger management problem. Domestic violence is based on power and control.

Steps you can take

Ask yourself, do I feel afraid of my partner? If you are ready to look at options, consider the following:

No one deserves to be abused. It is not your fault. You have choices and there are people who can help you. No one will make you do anything you don’t want to do.

Learn more about domestic violence. Talk to your local domestic violence agency, do research online, talk to your friends and family about what they have seen or think.

Talk with someone about making a safety plan. A safety plan is made up of actions you can take. Thinking about what to do before you have to do something is a great way to protect you and your children (if any). Where are all your personal papers (birth certificate, Social Security card, passport)? Who can you call if you need to leave quickly? Where can you go?

Talk with someone at work that you trust.

Explore the option of getting a restraining order. Local domestic violence agencies can help you and answer questions. See the Resources section at the back of this handbook.

For security reasons, consider providing your employer with a picture of the perpetrator and a copy of your protective order, if you have one.

Work with your employer to respond to telephone, fax, email, and mail harassment.

Consider removing your name and number from automated phone directories.

Review the safety of your parking arrangements. Consider an escort to your car, and park near the building entrance if possible.
Domestic Violence Statistics

21% of full-time employed adults report they were victims of domestic violence and 64% of them say their work performance has been significantly impacted.
*Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence, 2005.*

The annual cost of lost productivity due to domestic violence is estimated at $727.8 million with over 7.9 million paid workdays lost per year.
*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005.*

The healthcare-related costs of rape, physical assault, stalking, and homicide by intimate partners exceed $5.8 billion a year.
*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2003.*

One study of female domestic violence victims found that 44% were left without transportation when the abuser disabled the car or hid the car keys.

48% of perpetrators had difficulty concentrating at work, with 19% of offenders reporting workplace accidents or near accidents from inattentiveness due to preoccupation with their relationship.
*Maine Department of Labor and Family Crisis Services, 2004.*

Resources

**For Employers, Managers, and Supervisors**

- Employers Against Domestic Violence. Tel 508-894-6322.
- Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence. Tel 309-664-0667; www.caepv.org.
- For City of Cambridge managers and supervisors: Employee Assistance Program. Tel 800-828-6025.

**For Employees**

- For City of Cambridge Employees: Employee Assistance Program. Tel 800-828-6025.
- SAFELINK (24-hour live response hotline for emergency shelter, counseling, safety planning, and resources). Tel 877-785-2020.
- Transition House (24-hour crisis line, emergency shelter, education, and outreach). Tel 617-661-7203.
- Gay Men’s Domestic Violence Project (hotline for gay, bisexual, or transgender victims and survivors). Tel 800-832-1901.
- Network/La Red (hotline for lesbian, bisexual, or transgender victims and survivors). Tel 617-742-4911.
- Cambridge Police, Domestic Violence Unit. Tel 617-349-3371.
- Cambridge Public Health Department, Violence Prevention Coordinator. Tel 617-665-3816.

**For Batterers**

- Emerge: Counseling and Education to Stop Domestic Violence. Tel 617-547-9879.
Acknowledgements

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