



Surviving Abuse and Acts of Violence: An Ongoing Recovery Guide

Regardless of where abuse and violence occurs, outside or within the workplace, its destructive nature will impact your employees and presents human resources with unique challenges. From domestic violence, sexual harassment and physical assaults to intimidation, verbal abuse and microaggressions, acts of abuse and violence take several forms, but as an employer, it all boils down to one question: How can you best prevent, detect, intervene and protect?

Workplace violence is not defined by physical assault alone. It's comprised of several actions and/or behaviours which present far-reaching challenges and encompasses extensive and complex problems for both employer and employees. According to the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS), it can be defined as "any act in which a person is abused, threatened, intimidated or assaulted in his or her employment." It is generally meant to include threatening behaviour, verbal or written threats, verbal abuse and physical attacks.

Some Canadian jurisdictions include harassment as a form of violence, while others define harassment separately. Still, according to the CCOHS, harassment can be defined as "any behaviour that demeans, embarrasses, humiliates, annoys, alarms or verbally abuses a person and that is known or would be expected to be unwelcome. These behaviours include words, gestures, intimidation, bullying, or other inappropriate activities."

Abuse and violence are prevalent.

Harassment was the most common type of aggression faced by the respondents of an online survey conducted by Employment and Social Development Canada in 2017¹, with 60% reporting having experienced it. Thirty percent of respondents said that they had experienced sexual harassment, 21% that they had experienced violence and 3% that they had experienced sexual violence.



A 2014 Angus Reid Institute national survey² also found that over a quarter (28%) of Canadians have been on the receiving end of unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, or sexually-charged talk while on the job. Nearly half (47%) of women aged 35-54 reported having been harassed. People with disabilities and members of a visible minority are also more likely to experience harassment than other groups.

A 2001 U.S. study³ estimated that 2.3 million men and 1.1 million women had been victimized by a co-worker at some point. That being said, the majority of incidents of workplace violence are committed by individuals who are strangers to the victim. Men are less likely than women to know the perpetrator, with 52.9% of men considering their assailants strangers compared to only 41% of females. Regarding outside perpetrators, certain professions are more likely to experience workplace violence. According to the United States Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration, "Among those with higher-risk are First Responder workers, healthcare professionals, public service / customer service workers, more often those who exchange money with the public, and those who work alone or in small groups."

Violence hits your bottom line

We cannot ignore domestic violence. You might ask, what does domestic violence have to do with the workplace. In 2017, one of the most in-depth research papers undertaken in Canada brought to light several key findings on the effects of domestic violence in the workplace. Working with 22 of Ontario's Partner Assault Response programs, researchers at the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) partnered with the Centre for Research & Education on Violence against Women & Children (CREVAWC) and conducted a survey of 500 perpetrators of domestic violence. The survey sought findings on both the workplace of the perpetrator and the victim. It was found that domestic violence is linked to substantial negative effects on the productivity and safety of workers with close to half of respondents reporting violence issues negatively impacting their job performance.

More specifically, 33% of respondents reported being in contact with their partner or ex-partner during work hours to engage in emotionally abusive behaviours or to monitor their victims' actions or whereabouts. A quarter of the

abusing offenders used their workplace time to drop by the home or workplace of their victims. Most respondents said they were unaware or unsure of any resources and support available to them in the workplace regarding domestic violence issues and what help was available. Nearly 10% of respondents reported they caused, or almost caused, a work accident as a result of being distracted by these issues. About 25% told that violence issues led to absenteeism and taking paid time off work to deal with domestic violence issues.

A 2009 report⁴ from the federal Justice Department estimated the total economic impact of spousal violence on employers in Canada that year was about \$117 million. A survey by Western University in Ontario, Canada and the Canadian Labour Congress published in 2014, said about 34% of respondents reported having experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetime and 35.4% reported having at least one co-worker who they believed was a victim of domestic violence.

In the rest of this article, we'll be looking at:

- How to detect
- How to intervene
- How to prevent through sound internal policies

To help shed some light on those issues, we've asked the expert advice of Andrea Dermody, Trauma Specialist at Homewood Health.

As an employer, how can I detect if an employee suffers from abuse and violence?

Where cases involving acts of violence perpetrated by outside offenders in the context of one's occupation can most often be obvious (armed robbery, physical aggression towards a first responder, etc.), forms of internal workplace abuse and violence may be non-obvious and can be difficult to detect because they are subtle and can be laden within workplace culture.

"They can come in the shape of harassment or microaggressions which can be quite insidious", says Ms. Dermody.

Microaggressions are subtle, derogatory messages sent verbally or not, consciously or not, that are communicated at a member of a marginalized group. Compounded over time on a daily regime, those microaggressions can produce harmful effects. Andrea shared that, while she did not experience macroaggression, she experienced violence in the form of verbal and emotional harassment in a previous workplace.

It was carried out by another employee engaging in verbal abuse. Their actions and words were subtle at times, for example, in the form of passive aggressive comments on the way I looked and my personality, engaging in eye rolling and silent treatment. However, their actions could also be quite obvious at others times, for example, questioning my competency to speak on certain topics related to my role at events within the organization as well as responding to my interactions to them by raising their voice, puffing up their body and swearing at me during our conversations. I felt quite helpless in this situation. I noticed that my feelings toward my workplace were impacted, my feelings of anxiety were extremely high and I lost 15 pounds, which, for me, was a strong indicator that my sympathetic nervous system (threat response – fight, flight, and freeze response) had become quite activated. Unfortunately, at that time, I did not have the confidence to address it directly with the person.

It's not uncommon for employees to find it difficult to address the violence that they are experiencing from their aggressor. Dermody identifies that "[individuals who experience violence at work can feel stuck or unsure of how to manage their experience because of lack of knowledge as well as fear of their employment being in jeopardy, which is why it is so important for employers to promote awareness and knowledge regarding how violence in the workplace is managed and the consequences that result from those unacceptable actions or behaviours]". In the case of criminal assaults, workplace violence (47%) is less likely to be reported than non-workplace violence (52%)⁵.

So the question remains: How can employers detect occurrences if victims do not come forward?

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association (2014), 50% of workplace harassment victims suffer mental health problems. Fear and discomfort about interacting daily with the aggressor will cause a great deal of anxiety and the longer the situation persists, the more chances it could lead

to psychosomatic symptoms, depression and induce trauma to the point of potentially developing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder(PTSD).

Ms. Dermody recommends looking for changes in behaviour, such as an employee becoming withdrawn or socially isolated. Performance can also be an indicator. There can be changes in one's level of engagement and increased absenteeism. If it arises between colleagues, employee communications and general team climate can be affected.

"It's important to note that these behaviours can also be observed in individuals experiencing a high amount of stress in their lives. This is also why it is important to encourage and foster good relationships between employees and their employers. Having an employer taking a sincere and empathetic interest in the well-being of their employees is key to success of the organization as a whole".

As an employer, how can I take action?

"If employers can create a knowledge base or space for their employees to come to them, there can be an emphasis placed on problem-solving the situation. When violence exists, it can be further perpetuated by an unawareness of resources for support."

One key action is to actively promote knowledge that your workplace offers support to those affected by violence, regardless of if it is taking place at work or at home. Having workers or employers with some trauma-informed background or training is also helpful for supporting workers to seek help, feel understood and get connected to services and supports through their workplace or in their community.

"It does not mean that a person is an expert on violence or abuse, rather, it's that they have knowledge of how to support an individual from a whole person perspective, that is, to make sure that when a person encounters violence their physical, social and psychological concerns are recognized and taken into consideration."

Talking about abuse is not an easy topic, which is why bringing in an expert to address employees and/or hosting an internal human resources session with training for your staff on being trauma-informed is important.

“Another important quality to emphasize is the use of empathy during interactions with a person who is impacted by violence, which can go a long way in helping a person coming forward to feel safe, understood and stabilized.”

On makeitourbusiness.ca, you’ll find guidelines on how to communicate with an employee at risk. In a nutshell, it advises the following:

- Be supportive and reassure that coming forward was the right decision and will not affect their status or their work within the organization;
- Listen carefully and respect their suggestions, needs and choices;
- Express understanding that personal issues can influence or sometimes affect work performance;
- Tell the person it’s not their fault and that, for you and the organization, abuse is taken seriously, it is not normal and it is definitely not accepted.
- Validate their feelings, whether they feel hurt, anger, fear, and shame or trapped in a situation embroiled in conflicting emotions.
- Focus on safety and assess the situation. Is the situation a crisis? Does it represent a threat to this person or other employees?

It’s important to note, given the discussion points above, the conversations you have must remain confidential unless there is an underlying risk of harm to the employee and/or immediate members of their family.

Do I have to take action?

If a person is not willing to talk about what they are going through, you can still offer your ongoing support to them for when they feel they are ready to get help. Initiate open discussions on safety concerns and support them to engage in safety planning, if needed. As mentioned above, such conversations are private and further action must be at the direction of the employee unless there is an underlying risk of harm to the employee and/or their immediate family members. You have to establish clear communication about when they think they may need to get authorities involved or when you may need to as an employer. Even if a worker does not want any steps taken, as the employer you may still be required to take some action to protect the targeted worker and other workers, depending on the circumstances.

“Consent and confidentiality need to be considered but safety is a priority. Policy and procedure are needed for this very reason and employers have to be familiar with their duty to report. It is also important to consult with experts in one’s community such as the Police and Children’s Aid Society to address safety concerns and questions related to duty to report”, advises Andrea Dermody.

Which means that, if there is an immediate risk or threat to employees, or a case of workplace domestic violence, you must report it to the appropriate authorities, such as the police and workplace experts. So you must make it clear to your employee that it is possible you have a legal obligation to act to protect them and other employees from violence.

“Additionally, by speaking to the employee impacted by violence and asking them what they think needs to be done to protect that person and also what steps needs to be taken to protect their coworkers, you will help instill that person with a sense of power and choice in a situation where their power and choices may have been taken from them by the aggressor.”

Andrea Dermody adds that when discussing problem solving as related to violence in the workplace between staff members, it is indeed important that the worker who is impacted by violence is supported, but that the perpetrator of the violence shouldn’t be overlooked.

“He or she should be provided with options for getting support as well. In order for violence to stop or be prevented in the workplace (or anywhere), there needs to be both preventative and reactive responses in place for all parties effected.”

“P” for Prevention as in Policy

As the CCOHS advocates: “The most important component of any workplace violence prevention program is management commitment. Management commitment is best communicated in a written policy.”

With regard to policy, Ms. Dermody would recommend that employers consider working with an anti-violence group in their community or province to get further guidance and expertise.

A written policy will inform employees about “what behaviour (e.g., violence, intimidation, bullying, harassment, etc.) management considers inappropriate and unacceptable in the workplace; what to do when incidents covered by the policy occur” and will also provide contacts for reporting any incidents. Most importantly, a policy gives employees an avenue to seek assistance or support when needed.

References:

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