

# Violence and Harassment in the Workplace

## Violence and Harassment in the Workplace - Family (Domestic) Violence

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## What is workplace violence and harassment?

Most people think of violence and harassment as physical assault. However, workplace violence and harassment are a much broader problem. It is any act in which a person is abused, threatened, intimidated or assaulted in their employment. Spreading rumours, swearing, verbal abuse, pranks, arguments, property damage, vandalism, sabotage, pushing, theft, physical assaults, inflicting psychological trauma, anger-related incidents, rape, arson, and murder are all examples of workplace violence.

NOTE: In this document, we use the term violence to also include bullying and harassment

Please refer to the following OSH Answers documents for information:

- [Bullying in the Workplace](#)
- [Internet Harassment or Cyberbullying](#)
- [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace](#)
- [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Family \(Domestic\) Violence](#)
- [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Legislation](#)
- [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Dealing with Negative Interactions](#)

- [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Parking Lot Safety](#)
  - [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Warning Signs](#)
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## What is family (domestic) violence?

Family violence is any form of abuse or neglect that a child or adult experiences from a family member, or from someone with whom they have an intimate relationship. It has also been described as the abuse of power within relationships of family, trust, or dependency that endangers another person.

Overall, family (or domestic) violence is a pattern of behaviour used by one person to gain power and control over another with whom they have or have had an intimate relationship. It can include any of many forms of behaviours. There are additional dimensions to harassment and violence in a family relationship that are unique, such as:

- using property, pets, or children to threaten and intimidate,
- not arriving for child care,
- threatening deportation if the target was sponsored,
- economic abuse such as withholding or stealing money, stopping a partner from reporting to work, or from getting or keeping a job, or
- sexual, spiritual, or emotional abuse or neglect.

Each situation is unique. It is therefore important to understand that no one behaviour in itself is a confirmation of family violence. Be alert to changes in patterns of behaviour.

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## Who can be a target of family violence?

Anyone can be a target of family violence, regardless of age, race, religion, sexual orientation, economic status, or educational background. The abuser may be a current or former spouse or intimate partner, relative, or friend. Men and women can both be abused or abusive in their relationships.

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## Is family violence a workplace issue?

Yes. When family violence follows a target to work, it becomes a workplace issue. An aggressor can present a risk to the target or others in the workplace itself.

You may have heard people say “it is a personal matter”, “it’s none of my business” or “that’s between the couple”, for example. These attitudes further isolate people experiencing violence creating a barrier between the target and those who may be in a position to provide valuable support and assistance. The workplace can play an important role in assisting people experiencing violence of any kind to get the necessary help.

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## What effect does family violence have on the workplace?

People experiencing family violence often feel isolated. They may feel ashamed or have concerns that their situation will compromise their employment so they are afraid to say anything. Similarly, those who suspect family violence may be affecting an employee are afraid to approach this subject or intervene for many reasons. This hesitation and further isolation increase the risk to those who experience family violence. In addition, people experiencing family violence often experience difficulty getting to work and state that their work performance is negatively affected. Other implications for the workplace include:

- reduced productivity and motivation
- decreased worker morale
- potential harm to employees, co-workers, or clients
- increased replacement, recruitment, and training costs if targets of family violence are dismissed for poor performance or absenteeism
- strained co-worker relations

Examples of how family violence may appear at work include (this list is not complete):

- frequent and disruptive text messages, or phone calls from a family member or partner
- a family member or partner showing up at the target's workplace and disrupting co-workers (e.g., asking many questions about the employee's daily habits)
- sudden avoidance of social situations or withdrawal from co-workers
- sudden changes of address or reluctance to reveal a current address
- being the victim of vandalism or threats
- etc.

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## Are there laws about protecting workers from family violence in the workplace?

Some jurisdictions expressly include domestic or family violence within occupational health and safety legislation, while others do not. For example, in Ontario, the Occupational Health and Safety Act includes a provision for “domestic violence” in section 32.0.4.

In Manitoba, the Employment Standards Code includes “Interpersonal Violence Leave”, which specifically includes domestic violence. This type of leave of absence provides targets of domestic violence with paid and unpaid leave so they have the assurance of job protection while they seek safety. This action could include finding suitable housing, seeking care for physical or psychological injuries, accessing legal services including putting protective orders in place, etc.

However, it is the employer's general duty across all jurisdictions to ensure all employees have a safe and healthy workplace, including protecting all employees from various forms of violence.

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## What can the workplace do?

A supportive and accommodating workplace provides the individual with an opportunity to establish financial independence and provides the individual with access to the help they need in their unique situation.

While respecting confidentiality and privacy as part of their [workplace violence and harassment prevention policy](#), employers should also take responsibility to:

**Identify Warning Signs:** Because people who experience family violence are more likely to report it to a co-worker than to others in the workplace, all employees should be educated and trained on recognizing the warning signs and risk factors for family violence, as well as on steps to take when reporting is appropriate.

**Establish a support network:** Various workplace parties can offer support and assistance to employees experiencing family violence. Working together in a team that may include the supervisor, trusted co-worker, human resources, Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provider, and union representatives may be a helpful approach to providing a supportive network. The employer may also be able to help connect the individual to support services available in the local area.

**Develop or support a safety plan:** Workplaces can help by supporting or creating individualized personal and workplace safety plans to address the situation. Update the plans as circumstances change. Share the plans with anyone who needs to know about the situation in order to ensure safety. Safety plans may include:

- Asking if the target has already established protection or restraining orders. Help make sure all the conditions of that order are followed.
- Talking to the employee, work together to identify solutions. Follow up and check on their well-being.

- Asking for a recent photograph or description of the abuser. Alert others such as security and reception so they are aware of who to look for.
- When necessary, relocate the employee so that they cannot be seen through windows or from the outside.
- Removing the affected employee's contact information from publicly available company directories or websites.
- Changing the affected employee's workplace phone number, having another person screen their calls, or blocking the abuser's calls or emails.
- Pre-programming 911 on a phone or cell phone. Installing a panic button in the affected employee's work area or providing personal alarms.
- Providing a well-lit parking spot near the building, or escorting the affected individual to their car or to public transit.
- Offering flexible work scheduling if it can be a solution.
- Calling the police if the abuser exhibits criminal activity such as stalking or unauthorized electronic monitoring.
- If the target and abuser work at the same workplace, avoid scheduling both employees to work at the same time or location wherever possible.
- If the abuser works at the same workplace, use disciplinary procedures to hold the abuser accountable for unacceptable behaviour in the workplace.

[Adapted from: Making It Our Business (2014) from the Centre for Research & Education on Violence against Women & Children]

**Refer:** Seek expert advice for safety planning from your local women's shelter or the police. Threats of violence should be reported and emergency procedures should be clearly communicated to all employees.

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## Where can I find more information on domestic violence in the workplace?

- Addressing [Domestic Violence in the Workplace: A Handbook for Employers](#), WorkSafeBC
- [Make It Our Business](#), Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children (with the University of Western Ontario and the Canadian Labour Congress)
- [What is Family Violence?](#), Public Health Agency of Canada
- [Addressing Domestic Violence in the Workplace](#), Public Services Health and Safety Association

- [Family Violence: It's Your Business \(A Workplace Toolkit\)](#), New Brunswick

(We have mentioned these organizations as a means of providing a potentially useful referral. You should contact the organization(s) directly for more information about their services. Please note that mention of these organizations does not represent a recommendation or endorsement by CCOHS of these organizations over others of which you may be aware.)

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