



You are not alone

Talking to an Employee Experiencing Domestic/Intimate Partner Violence

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Talking about domestic/intimate partner violence can be difficult. Bringing up personal issues with an employee can be uncomfortable and you may feel frustrated if an employee doesn't want to take action. When you handle these concerns genuinely, it is a starting point for increasing safety in the workplace and providing support. Remember that it is not your role to be a therapist or to 'fix' the situation. Reaching out, showing concern and offering support can make a big difference.

These are some tips for speaking to an abused person, as well as some reminders to help you deal with frustration.

Talking to the employee

Since it can be difficult to identify someone experiencing domestic/intimate partner violence, approach conversations with caution. Remember to bring up domestic/intimate partner violence only in a safe and private environment. You can start a conversation with statements such as:

- "I'm concerned about you. You're such a good employee, but you've seemed distracted and upset recently."
- "Sometimes when a person's performance changes at work, it could mean they are experiencing conflict at home. Could this be happening to you?"
- "I noticed the bruises you had last week and you've been off work more often than usual. I am concerned about you. Is someone hurting you?"
- "You looked upset and worried after that phone call today. Are you okay? Can I help?"

You could ask:

- "What can we change here to help you feel and be safer at work?"
- "Has your partner ever threatened to come to work?"
- "May I give you information about resources in the community that can support you?"

You are encouraged to be mindful of the type of language that you use when talking to employees and to avoid labelling them, using terms the employees don't identify with (e.g. victim).

When talking to your employee, do NOT say things like:

- "This is so hard to believe!"
- "Things may get better with time."
- "I can't believe you put up with this!"
- "Your partner just doesn't seem like that kind of person."
- "If you're still with them, it must not be that bad."
- "You can't stay in this situation."
- "You have to leave!"

These statements might make employees experiencing domestic/intimate partner violence feel like you don't believe them or that you are blaming them for allowing their situation to continue. If someone thinks you don't believe them or their situation isn't serious, it could cause them to withdraw and not confide in you again. Furthermore, experts advise that those who experience domestic/intimate partner violence should not be encouraged to leave a relationship before they feel ready and have assessed that it is safe.

What to say if an employee discloses abuse

If the employee discloses abuse, show that you are supportive, remain non-judgemental when you ask questions, be clear and be sensitive.

Believe your employee and be supportive. Acknowledge the courage it takes to talk about domestic/intimate partner violence and reassure the employee that they have done the right thing by coming forward. Make sure the employee knows that this will not reflect badly on his/her work:

- "You did the right thing by talking to me. You are not on your own to deal with this. We're here to help and support you. You don't have to worry about your job."
- "Help is available. I am here if you need me and there are programs in the community with special expertise that can help."

Listen carefully. The person knows more about their situation than anyone else. Respect the employee's suggestions, needs and choices:

- "You know your situation best and you are in charge of your life. We want to work with you to help keep everyone safe."

Express understanding. Tell the employee that you know sometimes "personal issues" can spill over into the workplace or interfere with work performance:

- "Sometimes things happen in our lives that we don't expect or choose. We can't always put a boundary between home and work, or the personal and the professional. What's important is to handle this in a way that keeps you and everyone else in our workplace safe."

Tell the employee it is not his/her fault:

- "It's not your fault. No one deserves to be hurt. Abuse is not normal and it's not Okay."

Validate the employee's feelings. The employee may feel hurt, angry, afraid, ashamed or trapped. They may love the abuser and think that the abuser can change:

- "This must be really difficult for you. It's normal to have a lot of conflicting emotions."

Focus on safety. Assess the situation and invite the employee to participate in creating a personal safety plan for her/his time at work. The employee should also be encouraged to:

- Create a personal safety plan with trained community professionals for time spent outside of work
- Share ideas with the employer on making changes to increase safety for everyone at work — including threat assessments, safety planning, and risk management
- Contact the Employee Assistance Program and/or a local anti-violence program to get additional information and support

As well, ask open-ended questions about changes, if any, which could be made in the workplace to make the employee feel safer. For example, arranging a schedule that is less predictable might protect the employee from harassment by an abuser who knows their current patterns. This might mean offering a flexible schedule, different shifts, or other work arrangements. Identify opportunities for time away from work to make it easier for them to get help and to rebuild their life.

Consider the children (if any). If children are involved in domestic/intimate partner violence and there are concerns for their safety because of violence in the home, the law is clear that you must contact the Children's Aid Society in your community immediately. Explain to the employee that this is your legal obligation.

Maintain confidentiality. Remember to keep the information confidential. If there is a threat to the workplace, tell your employee that you will only share the information on a need-to-know basis. If you do need to share information, a more empowering approach is to tell your employee that you will try to do it when they are present, or ideally allow them to share the information.

Other factors to remember:

- No matter how terrible a situation sounds, those who experience domestic/intimate partner violence are more likely to downplay their situation than to exaggerate it
- They tend to understate their fear
- Avoid giving personal advice, as domestic/intimate partner violence involves the perpetrator taking control away from the abused person, so it is important not to engage in the same behaviour
- Instead of giving advice, provide support, information and contact details for internal and external resources

What to say if an employee denies the abuse

If the employee chooses not to disclose abuse, but you still have reason to believe it is a concern, do not push the employee. Tell them that you are still going to be there anytime they

want help. Consider that the employee may be afraid or not ready to take the next steps. Very often, even though it may not seem so to us, the abused person knows what timing and action is best for themselves.

Remind the employee of any services that the workplace offers, such the Employee Assistance Program, and/or direct the employee to external resources.

Dealing with frustration

Helping someone experiencing domestic/intimate partner violence can be difficult and frustrating. They may not explore the options you suggest, which could cause you to experience “compassion fatigue.” Remember that domestic/intimate partner violence involves the perpetrator controlling the person and taking away her/his power. It can therefore be difficult for someone suffering abuse to leave the relationship.

There are many reasons why those experiencing domestic/intimate partner violence sometimes stay with their abusive partners, including:

- Financial dependence
- Lack of suitable housing options
- Religious or cultural pressures
- Social stigma
- Love for the partner and desire to support their partner to heal and change
- Personal plans to escape a relationship are in progress
- Current situation (e.g. dependants involved) renders it safer to stay
- Physical disability
- Dependency on partner for care
- Threats of deportation, lethal violence or of committing suicide if the relationship ends

Domestic/intimate partner violence can be a gradual process and it may take years for the abused person to realize it will never stop. If you become frustrated while trying to help an employee who is experiencing domestic/intimate partner violence, remember that it can take time for someone who has experienced abuse to feel empowered. Your support is important and can make a real difference.

Sources:

1. Worksafe BC. Addressing Domestic Violence in the Workplace: A Handbook for Employers. 2012.
2. Make It Our Business. Guidelines for communicating with employees at risk of workplace domestic violence. 2010.
http://makeitourbusiness.ca/sites/makeitourbusiness.ca/files/MIOB_Guidelines_Communicating_w-Employees.pdf