

Responding to Violence: What Should I Do if I Suspect My Employee May be Experiencing Domestic Violence?

Victims of domestic violence usually do not report abusive incidents to their employers. Despite growing awareness of abuse and acknowledgement of society's responsibility to address it, the movement continues to battle the stigma faced by many victims. Domestic violence is the responsibility of those who act violently and abusively; however, ideas and questions ingrained in our social culture often result in victim-blaming, leaving those who are abused to contend with feelings of shame and embarrassment. These feelings continue to foster the belief that employers "don't want to know about it," thereby preventing victims from seeking the support they may need.

If you suspect an employee may be a victim of domestic violence, but the employee has not disclosed this to you, focus on any job performance issues that may have arisen and express concern about those changes in job performance. If there are signs of abuse, either physical or behavioral, which warrant concern, express these concerns in a supportive, nonjudgmental manner.

Become an Active Witness: SEE IT and SAY IT

SEE IT: Notice and acknowledge something is wrong

SAY IT: Talk about it

Try the following steps when prompting a discussion with an employee who may be experiencing abuse:

- 1. Plan on what you want to say, determine a good time and private place to talk.** A private setting and appropriate circumstances are important.
- 2. Tell her what you see**
"I noticed you have some bruises."
"I'm concerned because you have been coming into work late. Is something preventing you from getting here on time?"
- 3. Express concern for her**
"I am worried about you."
"I am afraid for your safety."
"You seem kind of uneasy around your partner, is everything okay?"
- 4. Show support**
"What can I do to help you feel safe at work?"
"No one deserves to be hurt."
- 5. Offer referrals to resources**
"I have the phone number to . . . (crisis center, Employee Assistance Program, etc.)"

If Your Employee Begins to Talk about the Abuse . . .

- Ask open-ended questions like *How can I help you?* or *What do you want to see happen?*
- Listen without judgment or criticism. A victim of domestic violence is the best judge of how to keep herself and her children safe.
- Allow plenty of time for the person to answer your questions. Listening comes first, long before solutions can be discussed or implemented.
- Avoid giving advice. Instructing her to “just leave” will minimize her experience and could be extremely dangerous.
- Emphasize your concern. Offer support and let her know she is not responsible for what is happening.
- Share your organization’s role in addressing domestic violence. Let her know you and the organization believe verbal, emotional, physical, or sexual abuse in a relationship is never acceptable. There are no excuses.
- If she/he denies any type of abuse in his/her relationship or says that everything is okay, accept what she/he is telling you. Do not force people to disclose the abuse. A victim’s silence may be due to cultural, racial, linguistic, or gender issues which make it difficult to talk about such personal experiences. Privacy rights need to be respected. Keep the door of communication open by offering information if it is ever needed.
- Recognize boundaries. Admit that you are not a trained professional and suggest she contact a crisis center advocate for emotional support, to review safety plans, etc.
- Provide the employee with referrals to an Employee Assistance Program, local crisis center, and other supportive resources. Share the roles of these services and how they can help.

We encourage businesses to strive to create workplaces in which employees feel safe talking about the problems they face in their personal lives. You can educate employees about domestic abuse by displaying posters, safety cards, and other materials that provide information and condemn abuse. Additionally, supervisors should address performance-related issues that may arise due to domestic violence and make referrals to appropriate services that can assist and support the employee.