

The Obstacles and Responses to Domestic Violence in the Workplace

- An estimated 3.6 million Australian adults (20% of the population) have experienced physical and/or sexual family and domestic violence since the age of 15.
- 11.8% (2.2 million) have experienced violence from a husband, wife or partner.
- 5.1% (935,000) have experienced violence from a boyfriend, girlfriend or date.
- 6.6% (1.2 million) have experienced violence from another family member.

AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS' 2016 PERSONAL SAFETY SURVEY (PSS)

For many, the workplace can represent a variety of safeguards for someone who is suffering from domestic and family violence (DFV) and be a place where they can come forward about their experiences. However, there are a number of obstacles a DFV victim may face that the workplace should be aware of.

THE OBSTACLES

The first major hurdle for a DFV victim disclosing their abuse is the perceived stigma that surrounds the issue.

- Almost 1 in 3 (32%) Australians believed that women who do not leave their abusive partners are partly responsible for violence continuing.
- Over 2 in 5 (42%) Australians agreed it was common for sexual assault accusations to be used as a way of getting back at men.
- 1 in 5 (20%) Australians believed violence is a normal reaction to day-to-day stress.

- Over 1 in 5 (21%) Australians agreed that sometimes a woman can make a man so angry he hits her without meaning to.

Australian-based survey published in: "How are gender inequality and violence against women related?" 2018

A second issue that emerged from the survey was that an estimated 2 in 5 Australians do not know where to access help for a domestic violence issue. This problem also exists in the workplace where, in many cases, the chances of a victim seeking help are worse:

- Approximately half of all employees do not know if their employer had a DFV policy.
- The majority of employees experiencing DFV do not choose to disclose this to their employer (66%).
- Of the 34% that do disclose, most do so to their manager or a colleague.
- People who disclose find it difficult to do so: 56% describe the experience of disclosing with negative, mixed or neutral sentiments.

Survey conducted by Sightlines team at Domestic Violence Service Management, 2019.

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It's clear that the workplace has a role to play in helping those who are suffering from DFV. Employers have a duty of care and a legal responsibility to provide a safe and effective work environment and preventing and tackling domestic abuse is an integral part of this.

THE WORKPLACE RESPONSE TO DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

Forward-thinking businesses have already recognised that domestic abuse is a workplace wellbeing issue and are taking positive steps to support employees who may be victims.

A workplace should:

1. Understand the issue, and
2. Implement a clear strategy that is known to all employees.

1: Understanding the issues

Employers and employees are not expected to become specialists in handling DFV, nor should staff take on the role of healthcare workers or counsellors. However, there is a role for everyone in addressing the stigma, knowing what to look for and encouraging conversations when it is suspected that something is wrong.

The changes in an employees to look out for include:

Work productivity — A change in the person's working patterns. e.g., frequent absence, lateness, or reduced quantity and quality of work.

Changes in behaviour — A change in conduct that is out of character with previous behaviour. e.g., becoming quiet, anxious, easily frightened, aggressive, distracted or depressed.

Physical indications — Visible bruising or repeated injury with unlikely explanations. The victim may also use more makeup than they used previously to hide injury.

Other indicators — This can include a partner or ex-partner stalking the employee in or around the workplace.

Employees, particularly HR and managers, should receive specialist training to spot the signs of domestic abuse and respond accordingly. They should also learn how to hold a conversation about DFV when it is initiated. Remember that leaving the relationship can increase danger to both the victim and their children.

2. Implementing a clear strategy

A Domestic and Family Violence policy should:

1. Be tailored to the business
2. Include a clear definition of domestic abuse
3. Be easily accessible
4. Feature communication on what employees can expect from their employer if they disclose domestic abuse.
5. Confirm that disclosures will be treated in confidence, except where there is a risk of harm to a child, vulnerable adult or staff member.

Part of this strategy can involve providing training to ensure that the organisation has staff who can recognise the signs of DFV and know what steps to take to support colleagues.

Once a DFV victim has disclosed their situation, in addition to being listened to and supported, the employer needs to provide practical strategies support the employee.

The strategies can include:

1. Making reasonable adjustments for those whose health and performance are adversely affected by domestic abuse. For example, ensure that employees who have disclosed are not penalised by sickness or absence management systems.
2. Agreeing with the employee who is suffering from DFV what to tell colleagues and how they should respond if the abusive person telephones or visits the workplace.

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3. Allowing an individual to change work patterns or workload as and when they need it, whether to avoid their abuser monitoring their timetable or to allow time to facilitate any practical arrangements or medical appointments.
4. Notifying Reception and security staff of the abuser (including providing a photograph) so they are across the risk, should the person appear at the workplace.
5. Accommodating requests from the employee, such as redirecting their salary or amending their personal information such as address.
6. Where necessary and possible, facilitating a redeployment or relocation.
7. Ensuring that the employee does not work alone or in an isolated area. If the employee routinely works from home, ensure they have daily contact with a colleague.
8. Keeping a record of any incidents of abuse in the workplace, including persistent telephone calls, emails or visits to the employee.
9. Ensuring the employee has appropriate support contacts within your organisation and informing them of external support.

Ultimately, the role of an employer is not to deal with the abuse itself but to provide non-judgemental support and a clear and accessible workplace policy that supports affected employees with a range of measures if needed.

CONVERGE'S DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE HELPLINE

If your employer is with Converge, you could have access to our specialised Domestic and Family Violence Helpline (check with your HR department what is available to you). You can find the number within your Converge Portal, or call one of our friendly staff on **1300 687 327**. We also offer tailored training courses to help managers and employees create a safe space for victims and provide them with the help that they need.

Alternative support includes:

- **1800 Respect: 1800 737 732**
- **Mensline: 1300 789 978**
- **Kids Helpline: 1800 551 800**
- **General Practitioner**

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