

The Workplace Response to Family and Domestic Violence

In July 2020, a survey by the Australian Institute of Criminology revealed almost 10% of Australian women in a relationship had experienced domestic and family violence (DFV) the previous year.

These are harrowing statistics and demonstrate the need for further support of people dealing with DFV.

As owners, managers, or employees within an organisation, it's critical to recognise that the effects of DFV are not confined to a household, and we have a part to play in helping victims. Indeed, according to research conducted by the UN, 55-70% of all people experiencing DFV in Australia are in the paid workforce.

Considering we spend a third of our lives at work, it should come as no surprise just how important the workplace is for a victim of domestic and family violence.

THE VICTIM AND THE WORKPLACE

A workplace can represent a variety of safeguards for a DFV victim. It can provide:

- A place to escape
- Somewhere to connect with others and receive support
- An important source of income (which can enable routes out of a relationship)

However, the workplace can also be a negative place for victims. They can:

- Continue to experience harassment by a perpetrator whilst in the workplace
- Experience stress throughout the workday about returning home at day's end
- Work for an organisation where the workplace responses to DFV are poor or non-existent

The latter issue is one completely at the discretion of an organisation and, therefore, can be addressed by those tasked with making the workplace a safe space.

HOW CAN THE WORKPLACE BECOME A 'SAFE' ENVIRONMENT'?

Ultimately, we need to provide a safe space so the victim feels comfortable talking about their situation. But how do we achieve this in the workplace?

In 2019, the Sightlines team at Domestic Violence Service Management conducted a survey of people with lived experience of family and domestic violence and found:

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

The victims were also asked how they thought their organisation should improve. The top three responses to this question were:

1. People in the workplace should be compassionate and non-judgmental.
2. Workplaces should provide more (or improved) tangible support.
3. A marked improvement was needed in awareness and understanding of family and domestic violence.

When these three improvements are realised, victims are more likely to share their experiences and, therefore, have a better chance of receiving the help they need.



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1300 687 327

0800 666 367

+613 8620 5300

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APPROACHING SOMEONE YOU SUSPECT IS SUFFERING FROM FAMILY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

It's important to understand that even under improved conditions, some victims will not come forward because of ingrained stigma and feelings of shame. If you suspect someone is being affected by domestic and family violence you should:

- Approach them respectfully. Say something like, "I'm concerned about your safety", "I'm worried about you", or "Is there something I can do to help you be safer at work?"
- Talk about the things you have noted that are concerning e.g. "I noticed you have some bruises. Are you ok? Are you safe?", or "I've noticed you seem frightened of your partner [or other person you suspect is hurting abusing them]. Is everything OK? Are you safe?"

If they do engage with you and open up about what is happening, it's important you offer help in the following ways:

- Listen without judging. Believe what they tell you and never blame them for what is happening.
- Never focus on the domestic and family violence details, but rather on helping them to be safe and referring them to appropriate services, so they can be safer at home. Victims will be assessing how much they can trust you and will react negatively to signs of judgement from you. Victims are actually most at risk when they leave a perpetrator, so it's important to trust that they know their situation best.
- Don't insist that they leave their relationship or criticise them for staying.
- Talk to them about their DFV workplace entitlements and the options available to them, such as taking leave (DFV leave if available) or accessing flexible work arrangements.
- Discuss possible safety measures you could implement if the employee feels unsafe in the workplace, such as screening the employee's incoming calls, blocking emails, changing a phone number, or changing working hours or location.

- Provide the employee with appropriate contacts within your organisation or inform them of external support (see external support for details).
- Take steps to ensure all disclosures and activities are kept confidential, unless there is a legal or safety requirement for sharing information.
- Check with the employee what information can be shared and with who. There is usually a need to share certain minimum information with others to help enact safety measures.

External support:

- **Lifeline: 13 11 14**
- **1800 Respect: 1800 737 732**
- **Mensline: 1300 789 978**
- **Kids Helpline: 1800 551 800**
- **General Practitioner**

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