

Family violence in the workplace

TIP SHEET



In 2014, more than 68,000 incidents of family violence were reported to Victoria Police – an increase of 70 per cent on reports in 2010.¹ As well as affecting individuals and families, family violence can also impact workplaces, as it is likely that some employees will have experienced this issue, either directly or indirectly.

Family violence is destructive behaviour in an intimate relationship where one person tries to dominate and control the other. It includes a range of behaviours such as physical, verbal, sexual, emotional, social and financial abuse. For more information, read Relationships Australia's *Safe from Violence* booklet.

Family violence is associated with considerable financial costs to workplaces and the economy, in addition to personal costs to people directly affected.

In the 2008-09 financial year, violence against women and their children was estimated to cost the Australian economy around \$13.6 billion.² The direct costs to employers is estimated at \$465 million.²

Impact on individuals in the workplace

Family violence can have a severe impact on a person's paid employment as a result of:

- ongoing abuse in the workplace
- stress
- anxiety
- depression
- an impact on performance
- being late for work
- increased leave to attend appointments and to manage increased parenting responsibilities and commitments
- having to leave their job.

Women with a history of family violence have a more disrupted work history and consequently may earn lower personal incomes than women not affected by family violence.³

Financial abuse is also a significant issue for women, with financial dependence or uncertainty often impacting a woman's ability to leave the relationship.⁴

Despite these challenges, a workplace has the potential to be a separate and safe space, away from violence.

Employment can also provide financial security and social contact and networks, which are important for a person's wellbeing and may be critical for safety.

Organisational impact

Family violence can also impact workplaces through:

- increased staff turnover
- lost productivity
- misuse of resources (users of violence may use workplace resources to facilitate violent behaviour)
- increased absenteeism
- the impact of the violence/ circumstances on other staff.

A recent survey found that almost half of the employees who had recently experienced family violence discussed it with someone at work.⁵ Furthermore, it was discussed with colleagues, rather than with supervisors, HR staff or union representatives.

This research demonstrates how important it is for all employees to understand family violence and be able to talk about and respond to this issue in the workplace.

Discussing and asking questions about family violence, however, can be difficult. Often people are concerned about raising the issue of family violence, and what to say and do if someone identifies that they are experiencing family violence.

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Barriers to disclosing family violence

We know that not all people experiencing family violence disclose what's happening.

There are many reasons why people are reluctant to tell others what's happening, including:

- not identifying the behaviours as violence (especially non-physical forms of family violence such as emotional abuse and financial abuse)
- fear of reprisals – losing their children/partner/home/job
- fear of the violence escalating
- shame that the violence is happening and may have been for some time already
- social consequences – family and friends may find it difficult to know what to do, some cultures may have different perspectives on family violence
- poor or negative responses to them disclosing in the past, for example, not receiving the support that was needed
- not being believed.

Indicators of family violence

Indicators that someone is experiencing family violence can include:

- appearing nervous, ashamed or evasive
- being uncomfortable or anxious in the presence of their partner
- giving an unconvincing explanation of injuries that they or their child has sustained

- having recently separated or divorced
- suffering anxiety, panic attacks, stress and/or depression
- withdrawing from conversations
- regularly being late for work
- regularly needing to take leave for short periods
- requesting changes to working hours
- receiving more personal calls at work
- appearing not to be taking care of themselves as well as they usually do.

It's not easy to leave

It's important to remember that leaving a violent situation is not easy. Someone may find it difficult to seek help or leave for a variety of reasons including that they:

- fear for their lives
- fear that they and/or their children will experience further violence
- fear that they will lose their children to authorities – users of family violence often threaten this
- are experiencing financial violence and are financially dependent
- don't want to leave their community or family, or don't want to move their children away from their school.

What you can do

If you think that a staff member may be experiencing family violence, you need to:

- check that you are prepared and comfortable to have what might be a difficult conversation
- create a safe place where you can talk privately
- take a non-judgemental and curious approach
- believe the person
- let them know that violence is never okay
- ask them what assistance they need
- provide information about referral and support services.

Some organisations may be able to make arrangements to support staff experiencing family violence, including family violence leave, flexible work times and ongoing emotional support.

Organisations may also need to put a safety plan in place which should include actions or procedures for a range of situations, for example, if the partner rings or turns up to the workplace.

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References

- 1 Victorian Government. (2015). *Measuring the Toll: The Family Violence Index*. Melbourne: Victorian Government
- 2 Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. (2009). *National Council to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children*. Canberra: Australian Government.
- 3 Franzway, S. Z. (2007). Domestic violence and women's employment. *Proceedings of the Our Work Our Lives Conference* (pp. 20-21). Adelaide: National Conference on Women and Industrial Relations.
- 4 Macdonald, F. (2012). *An overview of economic abuse*. Collingwood: Good Shepherd Youth and Family Services and Kildonan UnitingCare.
- 5 McFerran, L. (2011). *Safe at home, safe at work: National Domestic Violence and the Workplace Survey*. Sydney: Australian National Domestic and Family Violence Clearance.

Further reading

- *Safe from Violence: A guide for women leaving or separating* - Relationships Australia. Visit www.bit.ly/RAVsafe or call 1300 697 277.

More information

Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) provides sensitive and professional family violence prevention, support and recovery services across Victoria

RAV also provides quality training and professional development related to family violence.

For more information, visit www.rav.org.au/training

About Relationships Australia Victoria

RAV is a valued provider of specialist family and relationship services. A community-based, not-for-profit organisation with no religious affiliations, our services are for all members of the community, regardless of their religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, lifestyle choice, cultural background or economic circumstances.

We focus on providing effective services to strengthen relationships and social connections for individuals and families, and in schools, workplaces and communities across all life stages.

For more information on our programs, locations and how to access our services, please visit our website www.rav.org.au or call 1300 364 277.



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