

Firms need to be aware: Violence reaches from home into the workplace

Eugene M. Hyman and Sherry Simmons

We're going to discuss domestic violence.

But why, you might wonder, since it occurs only in the privacy of one's home.

Not so, say experts evaluating workplace violence and safety issues.

The National Institute for Justice estimates that from 1987 to 1990, domestic violence cost Americans \$76 billion dollars a year.

Homicide is the leading cause of death of women on the job.

Abusive husbands and/or partners harass 74 percent of employed battered women at work, either in person or over the telephone.

Further, these abusers cause 56 percent of them to be late for work at least five times a month, 28 percent to leave early at least five days a month and 54 percent to miss at least three full days of work a month.

Domestic violence is a social challenge that does not disappear when women leave their homes and enter the workplace. The batterers may show up at the workplace because they are often barred from going to the victim's home. The address and phone number of a victim can be easily changed, but not necessarily her job.

"The insidious epidemic of domestic violence is now in the workplace," said Joseph Kinney, executive director of the National Safe Workplace Institute. "We are seeing that violence is often lethal and that the workplace can be the scene of the killing."

There are ways an employer can make the workplace safer for all employees. Model policies are available from the Santa Clara County Domestic Violence Council. Also available are model safety plans for small to larger businesses to help prepare for the time when a domestic violence incident occurs in their workplace.

Denying the problem of domestic violence and its extension into the workplace will not make the problem go away. The U.S. Justice Department estimates that in 60,000 incidents of on-the-job violence each year, the victims know their attackers intimately.

It is vital to communicate with a victim of domestic violence in a way that shows your concern for the safety of the victim and her children.

Often the hardest part is showing your support in a nonjudgmental way. This is extremely important. Many--perhaps most--victims feel they are partly responsible for the violence against them. Victims often offer excuses for the violence--mainly because their brutalizers try to make them feel responsible, and the victims, out of fear and ignorance, accept responsibility.

Sometimes, despite our best intentions, our efforts to help have elicited statements of denial ("Oh, I'm just clumsy; I fell."); caused feelings of embarrassment and shame; and, in some cases, driven the victims to eliminate all contact with us.

Pam Butler, community outreach coordinator for Next Door: Solutions to Domestic Violence, and a survivor of domestic violence, said during a recent training session that for a long time she was too embarrassed and too much in denial to let well-meaning people help her.

"Finally, a police officer made a suggestion that changed my life," she said.

The officer--not the first one she had come into contact with over a long period of battering--gave her domestic violence shelter hot-line information and told her she could call any time, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The officer also said Ms. Butler could call anonymously. And that's what did it for her--knowing her identity could be protected. She called a number of times and a number of different shelters before she was able to marshal the courage to leave her batterer.

Santa Clara County district attorney George Kennedy understands the importance and difficulties of obtaining and giving victims assistance during the initial periods after domestic abuse.

"The methods of escaping a violent relationship are varied," he said. "A solution depends on the emotional and financial support as well as legal advice available to the victim."

Employers and concerned friends can call support groups and shelters any time to ask for advice on how to assist employees and friends.

So if you're confronted with signs of domestic violence against someone you care about, in the workplace or out, take a chance.

Make an effort to learn the hot-line numbers and share them with the victim. Let the abused know that, whatever she decides to do (or not do), you will be there

for her day and night.

And, most important, ensure the victim she won't have to give her name to anyone when she calls a shelter for help.

Giving support is important, but giving the right kind of support is crucial.

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