

ABUSERS IN THE WORKPLACE

When dealing with possible abusers in the workplace, safety is the primary concern. No one should put themselves or anyone else in the organization in a situation that seems unsafe.

An employee who becomes aware that a co-worker is using work hours and/or equipment, such as telephones and emails, to harass or abuse their intimate partner can take steps to address the situation:

- If it is safe to do so, the employee should approach the co-worker directly to identify the concern while avoiding making judgments.
- If it is not safe to approach the co-worker, contact a professional (such as someone in Human Resources) for help.
- Explain to the co-worker that they are concerned about both parties in the relationship (and any children they may have)
- Take immediate action if the co-worker makes threats or commits acts of violence in the workplace

An employer who is dealing with an employee who is or may be abusing someone (whether a fellow employee or someone outside of the workplace) should take steps to address the situation:

- If there is immediate danger, call 911 or building security
- If it is safe to do so, inform the employee that this behaviour needs to stop. Refer the employee to professional, community, or workplace resources, such as the Employee & Family Assistance Program (EFAP, also known as EAP) if available
- Do not force the employee to seek help and do not argue about the abuse
- Keep communication open and look for opportunities to help or connect them with resources
- If a conversation with the employee is possible, do not support or validate the abusive behaviour by saying things like "I understand that they made you mad..." Instead, open the conversation by saying things such as:

"I appreciate you coming forward with this. There are community and government resources with counsellors that can help you. Would you like me to connect you with them now?"

"I'm concerned. It's clear that you feel a lot of anger and tension over this. What can we do to make sure nobody gets hurt?"

- An employer does not need to be an expert on Domestic/Intimate Partner Violence (DIPV) to help – the employer can help the employee connect with trained professionals
- Be mindful of the personal safety of everyone in the workplace; do not physically intervene in a violent situation or try to mediate relationship issues

What if the abusive employee says, "It is none of your business"?

According to a recent *Pan-Canadian Survey on Domestic Violence and the Workplace*, 75% of abusers had a hard time concentrating at work, 53% felt their job was negatively affected, and 19% reported being responsible for workplace accidents due to their engagement in intimate partner violence¹. Therefore, it is of concern to employers when an abuser's actions affect their workplace behaviours – in terms of both productivity and the safety of other employees. An employer should consider the following strategies and tactics:

- Express concern for the employee's safety and the safety of their partner and any children they may have
- Never argue with them about their abusive behaviour. This can make the situation more dangerous
- Call the police if the victim is in danger. The police are trained to assess the risk
- Keep the lines of communication open
- If the employee has children:
 - Express concern for the children's safety and emotional wellbeing – the abuser may be more willing to change their behaviour if they want to be a good parent.
 - Report the situation to [child protection authorities](#).

¹Wathen, C. N., MacGregor, J. C. D., MacQuarrie, B. J. with the Canadian Labour Congress. (2014). *Can Work be Safe, When Home Isn't? Initial Findings of a Pan-Canadian Survey on Domestic Violence and the Workplace*. London, ON: Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women and Children.

What if the victim/survivor² and the abuser are employed in the same workplace?

Situations where both the victim and the abuser in a DIPV situation are employees in the same workplace can be highly volatile. When both partners work in the same organization, the employer has to respond appropriately to both the victim and the abuser.

If the victim and abuser are both employed in the same workplace, appropriate action may include the following:

- Eliminate or minimize the possibility of contact between the employees while at work (e.g., schedule the workers on different shifts and keep the victim's schedule private)
- Make alternate work arrangements for either one or both – possibly different work locations, schedules, etc.
- Assist the victim in accessing Domestic, Intimate Partner or Sexual Violence Leave (under the [Employment Standards Act](#))
- Offer appropriate referrals to both employees, such as giving them information about where they can get help
- Help the victim with an [Individualized Workplace Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence Safety Plan](#) to help protect them at work.
- With the assistance of local organizations or professionals that work in DIPV (such as [Domestic Violence Outreach Workers](#)), develop a personal safety plan with the victim
- Talk to the employee who is the abuser, be clear about exactly what they said or did, and explain clearly why it is unacceptable
- Take necessary disciplinary steps to hold the abuser accountable for any inappropriate or unacceptable behaviour in the workplace
- Make it clear that workplace resources should not be used to harass, stalk, or abuse the victim
- Keep the lines of communication open with both employees

Unionized workplaces

When an employer becomes involved in attempting to intervene with employees involved in or affected by DIPV in a unionized employment environment, each employee involved has the right to have their union represent and support them.

It may be typical for a union to advocate for an employee when there has been disciplinary action contemplated or taken against them by the employer (for example, for using company resources and time to commit acts of DIPV), but it is also necessary for unions to provide support to employees who are victim/survivors of DIPV. A victim/survivor of DIPV whose employer has failed to address DIPV and to provide a safe workplace is entitled to support and protection from their union, as the failure to act is an action of the employer against the victim/survivor.

Remember : Every worker has a **right** to a healthy and safe workplace that is free of violence and harassment.

What effect do abusers have on the workplace?

- When staff become aware of the abuser, they may become distressed or feel uncomfortable at work
- Staff may be intimidated by the abuser
- Co-workers may fear for their own safety and require support
- The violence may put employees at risk

For more impacts of DIPV on the workplace, see

[Why Employers Should Care – Impacts of DIPV on the Workplace](#)

Resources available

- [Rights & Responsibilities of Employees & Employers](#)
- [Directory of services for abusive partners](#)
- [Love Shouldn't Hurt awareness campaign](#)

²Please note: the word "victim" is used throughout our toolkit where the term "survivor" could also be used to describe people subjected to domestic or intimate partner violence. While some identify as surviving the experience and others, as being victimized, we respectfully acknowledge that some people subjected to abuse do not relate to either term.

