

Workplace Violence Training Program: Domestic Violence

Start Session with Fatality Report

Start by noting that today's Safety Talk is on a difficult topic: family violence, also known as domestic violence or abuse. Explain that most people tend to think of domestic violence as a private matter that occurs behind the closed doors of a family's home. But domestic violence can also happen in public spaces including the workplace. A fatal shooting in Albuquerque, New Mexico is a sad example.

Angry about a child custody dispute with his ex-girlfriend, Robert Reza confronted her outside the New Mexico manufacturing plant where she worked and shot her. He then forced his way inside and killed two workers before turning the gun on himself. Four others were wounded.

The girlfriend (who was critically injured but eventually recovered and was released from hospital) had told coworkers that she planned to report domestic violence to authorities. But it's unclear whether management was aware of the situation. The police noted that Reza had been involved in a domestic violence complaint in another city.

Deliver This Safety Talk

Because of incidents like these, domestic violence is increasingly being recognized as a workplace safety concern. In fact, a national survey found that 21% of full-time workers in the US reported that they had been or personally knew victims of domestic violence. Among women, the age group at greatest risk for nonfatal intimate partner violence is 20 to 24. In Canada, 9% of female victims of spousal abuse report being stalked by a current or former spouse or common-law partner.

First, family violence sometimes follows its victims to work in the form of unwanted calls, visits, or even physical attacks. A worker dealing with family violence may also be distracted from working safely.

Family violence is physical, emotional/mental, sexual or financial abuse inflicted by one family member against another. The kind of family violence that most often spills over into the workplace is that between intimate partners such as husband and wife, boyfriend and girlfriend, or same-sex partners.

Who is involved in family violence? It can be anyone, regardless of job, social or economic status, gender, religion, race or culture.

Job loss, alcohol or drug use and other stressors can contribute to family abuse, but don't directly cause them.

Abuse at home can lead to problems at work:

- Lack of attention to safety.
- Interpersonal problems such as heightened sensitivity, isolation or lies to hide abuse.
- Excessive calls, visits, or other intrusions from the abuser at work.

The coworkers of domestic violence victims are also potential targets, either because they're in the line of fire when acts of workplace domestic violence occur or because the abuser deliberately targets them out of jealousy or as a way to hurt the victim.

However, as a coworker, you are also in a unique position to help. Victims of domestic abuse often choose a co-worker to confide in. You don't have to wait for the person to speak up. If you think the time is right, start the conversation.

Keep these things in mind:

- Learn about your company's policies on domestic abuse, and what kind of help might be available through your human resources department.
- Find out about shelters and other programs in your community to support abuse victims.
- Encourage the victim to come forward and seek help from the company and the police.
- Assure the victim of your own support.

Final Word

If you are a victim of family violence, consider asking your supervisor or a co-worker to direct you to help. If you suspect another worker is being abused at home, be prepared to listen when the person is ready to talk.