

How to Talk With Someone Who is Being Abused: Guidelines for Supervisors

*I think one of my employees may be experiencing domestic violence.
What should I do?*

Supervisors face one of the most challenging aspects of workplace response to domestic violence: what to say to an employee the supervisor believes is being abused, and how to say it in a way that is respectful of the employee's right to privacy.

Recognize: Signs of Domestic Violence at Work

The first step toward supporting an abused coworker is simply to recognize the signs of domestic violence. Remember to look for a *pattern over time* for a possible link to domestic violence. Indications may include:

- Unexplained absences
- Sudden medical absences
- Leaving early
- Personal calls that interfere with work (upsetting, constant
- Obvious fatigue
- Inability to provide good service to customers
- Changes in attitude and behavior towards co-workers
- Co-workers receive calls and/or threats from partner or victim
- Tardiness
- Injuries, bruises
- Inability to focus on assigned tasks
- Partner appears at workplace at inappropriate times
- Mistakes with details and the 'little things'
- Sloppiness in dress and makeup
- Not being 'present' or appearing 'vacant' on the job

Respond: Address Performance-Related Issues

It is not unusual for an abused employee's performance and attendance to suffer. If that is the case, you can address performance-related issues and make appropriate referrals to services that may assist the employee. By focusing on an employee's behavior at work, you are performing your role as supervisor.

Respect the Employee's Privacy. Unless an employee tells you about the abuse, do not make direct inquiries about known or suspected abuse. Victims of domestic violence are often reluctant to discuss their situation, even with close friends and family, and may very well deny that anything at all is going on despite seemingly direct evidence.

Instead, create a supportive working environment in which employees feel safe talking about the problems they face in their personal lives. You can educate employees about domestic violence with display posters, safety cards and brown bag seminars.

Keep it Confidential. Tell only those with a “need to know.” Always follow company protocols regarding behavior, performance, and safety issues. You may not be able to keep information confidential but only certain people will need to know about the situation. If there is a direct threat to the workplace, tell the employee that you need to take action to protect everyone.

Listen Without Judging. People experiencing domestic violence often believe their abusers' negative messages and feel ashamed, inadequate and afraid of being judged. Your employee may not do what you expect when you expect it. Abused people usually know what is safest for their situation.

Don't Give Advice. You may increase the danger by suggesting that your employee take steps that are actually unsafe. Let professionals with experience in domestic violence counsel your employee and develop a safety plan for home and work.

Offer Supportive Messages. Offer supportive messages such as:

- I am concerned for your safety.
- I am here if you need help.
- You don't deserve to be abused.
- You are not alone.
- Help is available.

Refer: Provide Information and Referrals

Refer abused employees to your company's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or community resources. Call **1.800.799.SAFE** for resources in your area.

Help Your Employee to be Safe at Work. Workplace safety takes a multidisciplinary approach that includes those responsible for building safety and security, IT, Human Resources, Legal, Benefits, and supervisors. If you suspect a threat may exist to the employee or to co-workers you must notify those responsible for workplace safety regardless of the wishes of the abused employee. Respect for privacy can be balanced with a need for safety and decisions should be made in consultation with appropriate staff.

Give an Abused Employee Time to Improve Performance. You can help abused employees perform better by offering them support and resources, and giving them time to improve any deficiencies. Your concern and support will mean a lot. Sometimes maintaining employment makes a difference between staying in an abusive situation and making a decision to leave and begin a new life.