

# How employers can help provide stronger domestic violence support resources at work



When Jessica’s boss asked whether her boyfriend was hitting her, the answer at the time—truthfully—was no.

That doesn’t mean her manager’s concern was unwarranted. The signs were there: Uncharacteristically sloppy work. Dropping immediate tasks to take calls from her boyfriend. Dark circles under the 25-year-old’s eyes—not bruises, but evidence of the sleepless nights spent enduring the tirades of emotional abuse that, just as Jessica’s boss suspected, would eventually turn physical.

“When she asked me that, I brushed it off,” Jessica says. “I didn’t see my situation as abusive. I saw it as us just being a really intense couple. And to be honest, I got defensive about it. But when things got worse, I knew I had someone in my life who was paying attention.”<sup>1</sup>

As many as 1 in 4 women, and 1 in 9 men, will face intimate partner violence in their lifetimes.<sup>2</sup> That means there’s a chance someone in your workforce has experienced—or is experiencing—this particular form of cruelty, whether or not you’re aware of it. And as a business leader, you’re in a position to help.

## **Domestic violence statistics show abuse doesn’t end at home**

The workplace plays a particular role in intimate partner violence. It’s a haven for people who are being abused to be away from their abuser, it’s full of people who see each other on a regular basis and can spot troubling changes in behavior, and it’s where people earn money—including those subject to financial abuse, a common component of domestic violence.<sup>3,4</sup> Still, 65% of employers don’t have a plan for handling domestic violence.<sup>5</sup>

And while employee well-being may be the driver behind supporting survivors of domestic violence, there are concrete business reasons to do so: Victims of intimate partner violence lose nearly 8 million days of paid work each year in the United States, part of the \$1.8 billion productivity loss that businesses shoulder.<sup>5</sup> And people who face domestic violence have secondary health effects beyond immediate injuries, such as increased risk of heart disease.<sup>6</sup>



#### 4 domestic violence support initiatives for the workplace

You can take action. [Workplaces Respond](#), a center for supporting violence survivors at work, has a rich library of resources available to employers and managers, survivors, colleagues and other advocates. Here are some ways to start.

##### 1. Have a clear domestic violence policy in your employee handbook.

This policy should outline security concerns, safety plans and guidelines for time off to handle legal affairs. (Workplaces Respond has [an example of a domestic violence policy](#) you can use as a template.) It should also include policies for holding abusive employees accountable for their acts.

##### 2. Start the conversation.

This includes general awareness-raising, such as posting [safety cards](#) about domestic violence resources in common spaces. It also means starting conversations with employees who show concerning signs—such as behavioral or personality changes, constantly checking in with one’s partner, giving excuses for injuries and wearing unseasonal clothes to cover physical signs of abuse.<sup>7</sup> In a private location, tell the employee what you’ve observed, avoiding using language that could sound judgmental or aggressive.<sup>8</sup> (Though Jessica felt supported by her manager when she asked whether she was being hurt at home, asking someone “Is your partner hitting you?” in an introductory conversation could silence the person you’re trying to help.)

##### 3. Create a domestic violence safety plan.

Domestic abuse can carry over physically into your workplace, in the form of unannounced visits, intimidation and stalking. Conducting a safety audit of your workplace protects all your employees by assessing factors such as whether work schedules are publicly posted and whether the physical configuration of your facility invites isolation. If you learn that an employee is facing an immediate threat, you can tailor a specific security plan for that situation.<sup>9</sup>

##### 4. Emphasize using employee assistance programs.

You can be a sympathetic ear, but your role as a business leader is to support employees, not counsel them. If you have a [robust mental health program](#) in place, you’re a step ahead. This is the time to remind people of the existing benefits that could help, such as employee assistance programs.

Remember that while some survivors may be best served by taking time away from work, others may turn to it as a source of empowerment, as Jessica did. When her boyfriend was arrested for assaulting her, she signed up for a weekend shift at work.

“I really wanted to throw myself into something and focus on something other than what was going on with him,” she says. “Work gave me a way to be around other people without having to talk about what was going on. Even when he was behind bars and I knew I was safe from him physically, I didn’t feel safe emotionally. Work became one of the places where I could feel safe.”

<sup>1</sup> Personal interview, August 2021.

<sup>2</sup> StatPearls. “Domestic Violence.” Updated 7.25.2021. [Accessed 8.30.2021](#).

<sup>3</sup> Harvard Business Review. “Intimate Partner Violence Is a Workplace Issue.” Published 2.24.2021. [Accessed 8.27.2021](#).

<sup>4</sup> Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence. “Financial Abuse.” [Accessed 8.27.2021](#).

<sup>5</sup> Society for Human Resource Management. “When Domestic Violence Comes to Work.” [Accessed 8.20.2021](#).

<sup>6</sup> BMC Cardiovascular Disorders. “Modeling lifetime abuse and cardiovascular disease risk among women.” Published 10.16.2019. [Accessed 8.27.2021](#).

<sup>7</sup> WebMD. “What Are the Signs of Domestic Abuse?” Published 3.13.2020. [Accessed 8.27.2021](#).

<sup>8</sup> Workplaces Respond. “Starting the Conversation.” [Accessed 8.27.2021](#).

<sup>9</sup> Workplaces Respond. “Incident Prevention and Response Strategies.” [Accessed 8.27.2021](#).

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