

IS IT DOMESTIC OR SEXUAL VIOLENCE? RECOGNIZING THE POTENTIAL SIGNS



Domestic violence affects 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men in their lifetimes. One in 6 women and one in 33 men will experience sexual violence. Both crimes can cause significant harm – physically, psychologically, emotionally, and economically – which often impact survivors’ work life and careers.

Abuse impacts everyone differently. Whether due to trauma or direct partner involvement, individuals experiencing abuse may exhibit signs similar to “problem employees” who are disengaged and fail to meet basic performance standards, such as:

- ❖ Increased absenteeism → Survivors of domestic violence on average lose 7.1 paid days of work a year, survivors of sexual assault 8.1 days a year, to seek medical attention, resources, and safety.¹ Abusive partners may also sabotage their partners’ ability to get to work on time, or may force them to leave work early.²
- ❖ Inability to concentrate → Trauma and fear can significantly impact brain function triggering a flight or fight response which can diminish cognitive functioning.³ Some abusers may also keep survivors up at night in efforts to sabotage their employment.⁴
- ❖ Increase in personal calls or visits → Domestic violence is about power and control, and abusive partners may constantly monitor their partners by calling to check on them or by showing up at the workplace unexpectedly.⁵
- ❖ Appearing agitated, angry, sad, or hypervigilant⁶ → Trauma, depression, and PTSD – all common among survivors – can result in survivors displaying emotions that appear to be inappropriate or extreme.⁷
- ❖ Not participating in meetings or other office activities → Individuals experiencing abuse may withdraw from activities and engagement with coworkers that they used to enjoy.⁸
- ❖ Physical signs of injury or chronic illnesses → Bruises, lacerations, and broken bones are often expected signs of abuse or violence, however domestic and sexual violence are more than physical abuse. Changes in health include headaches, gastrointestinal, and/or gynecological issues which are common conditions resulting from abuse.⁹

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. 2003. “Costs of Intimate Partner Violence Against Women in the US.” Atlanta, GA: Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.

² Adams, Adrienne E., Cris M. Sullivan, Deborah Bybee, and Megan R. Greeson. 2008. “Development of the Scale of Economic Abuse.” *Violence Against Women* 14 (5): 563–88.

³ “How Trauma Rewires the Brain.” n.d. DomesticShelters.Org. Accessed November 5, 2018. <https://www.domesticshelters.org/domestic-violence-articles-information/how-trauma-rewires-the-brain>.

⁴ Ridley, Ellen, John Rioux, Kim C. Lim, DesiRae Mason, Kate F. Houghton, Faye Luppi, and Tracey Melody. 2005. “Domestic Violence Survivors at Work: How Perpetrators Impact Employment.” Augusta, ME: Main Department of Labor & Family Crisis Services.

⁵ Swanberg, Jennifer E., and T. K. Logan. 2005. “Domestic Violence and Employment: A Qualitative Study.” *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 10 (1): 3–17.

⁶ Hypervigilance is defined as a state of being highly or abnormally alert to potential danger or threat.

⁷ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. *Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services*. Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series 57. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 13-4801. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014.

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Smith, Sharon G., Jieru Chen, Kathleen C. Basile, Leah K. Gilbert, Melissa T. Merrick, Nimesh Patel, Margie Walling, and Anurag Jain. 2017. “The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010-2012 State Report.” Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

All of these factors combined can have a profoundly negative impact on one's ability to fulfill their job duties, resulting in mistakes, missed deadlines, and an overall decline in work performance.

If an employee who previously had few performance issues begins to show changes in their behavior in the workplace, there may be an underlying cause beyond their control. If you suspect an employee or coworker may be experiencing domestic or sexual violence, there are things you can do to help.

1. Familiarize yourself with your company's workplace policies related to domestic and sexual violence regarding information on privacy and confidentiality, relevant leave protections, and potential accommodations to support survivor safety at work.*
2. Have contact information for the **National Domestic Violence Hotline**, the **Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network**, your **Employee Assistance Program**, and your local domestic violence and rape crisis programs available to provide referrals if needed. You can also reach out to advocates yourself to discuss how to support the individual.
3. **DO NOT** confront the individual about your suspicions of abuse. **DO** share your concern about their changes in behavior, and their safety and well-being.
4. If they disclose their situation, convey the message: "This is not your fault. You do not deserve to be hurt or abused."
5. Listen and be empathetic. Do not tell them what you think they should do.
6. Ask how you can help and offer referrals to local resources.

*If your organization lacks a specific policy to respond to domestic or sexual violence impacting the workplace, consider advocating for one. **Workplaces Respond to Domestic and Sexual Violence: A National Resource Center** can provide training, tools, and other resources to prevent and respond to the effects of domestic violence, sexual harassment & violence, trafficking, stalking, and exploitation in the workplace.

Get help or find more information:

WORKPLACES RESPOND

www.WorkplacesRespond.org

202-595-7382

NATIONAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE

1-800-799-SAFE (1-800-799-7233)

<https://www.thehotline.org>

RAPE, ABUSE, & INCEST NATIONAL NETWORK

1-800-656-HOPE (1-800-656-4673)

<https://online.rainn.org/>



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