

Asking about family violence in the workplace



TIP SHEET

Asking about family violence in the workplace can be difficult. However, a 2011 survey found that almost half of employees who had recently experienced family violence had talked about it with someone at work (McFerran)¹.

This shows the importance of employees understanding family violence, and being able to ask about family violence in the workplace.

Before you ask a staff member if they are experiencing family violence, consider if you are ready to hear the answer 'yes'.

It's common for people to have concerns about asking, such as:

- Will I be able to hear a difficult story and manage my own emotions?
- What should I do if the person becomes distressed?
- Will I be able to help them?

The following information will help you prepare to listen and respond appropriately when asking about family violence.

Tips for asking about family violence in the workplace

1. Create a safe place to talk

If you think that a staff member may be experiencing family violence, it is important to provide a safe place to talk. This should be a confidential conversation in a private place where the other party feels safe to disclose.

The first thing to say could be something like, 'I'm concerned about you. Could we go somewhere to talk privately?'

2. Establish confidentiality when asking the initial question

Start with a statement about confidentiality, such as, 'This is a confidential conversation. I won't say anything to anyone else unless you want me to. I've been concerned about you... How are things at home? Are you okay? How are the kids? Do you feel safe with your partner?'

If the staff member tells you that they are experiencing behaviours of concern but does not use the term family violence, you could say, 'The things you're describing are signs of family violence. Do you think you might be experiencing family violence?'

3. Respond to disclosure in a sensitive, non-judgemental way

Don't judge the person or their life. For example, you may think that people in violent relationships should leave the relationship, but this is not easy to do. Often the person using violence uses tactics that make it very difficult for their partner to leave and separation increases the risks associated with family violence.

Your role in responding to disclosures of family violence is to listen to and assist the person, not tell them what they should do.

Use empathic statements, such as:

- 'I imagine that this is a difficult time for you. There are services available that understand and can help.'
- 'This must be hard for you to talk about.'
- 'I'm aware that you may be feeling worried/scared /concerned. I'd like to be able to support you.'
- 'It sounds like you're having a really rough time. It must be hard for you.'
- 'Family violence can be very undermining and confusing.'

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3. Believe the person

Take them at their word. Don't question them about their behaviour or the circumstances.

4. Provide a strong statement that violence is never okay

Be clear that violence is never okay and that it is not their fault. Nothing they have done warrants physical, emotional or psychological violence.

Don't say or imply that they may have contributed to the behaviour. For example, if they have shouted at their partner this doesn't mean their partner can hit them. Don't excuse the behaviour.

Don't say that the violence may have happened because the other person was drunk, angry, stressed or depressed. A common feature of family violence is that the person using violence blames the victim/survivor for provoking them, or blames circumstances. It is not helpful to reinforce these myths.

Statements you can use might include:

- 'Sometimes people living with family violence think that the violence is their fault. The violence is the other person's responsibility, not yours.'
- 'It must be difficult to talk about family violence. Many people report feeling ashamed and embarrassed about what is happening, but I'm glad you've shared this with me.'

5. Ask whether they feel safe to go home today

This is an important question, as the subsequent discussion will depend on the answer.

If they don't feel safe, you need to ask:

- 'What would you like to do?'
- 'Do you have somewhere else you can go?'
- 'What arrangements do you need to make to collect children from school/child care and ensure they are safe?'
- 'Would you like me to call someone for you?'
- 'What would help you? / What do you need?'



Nothing they have done warrants physical, emotional or psychological violence.

If they do feel safe to go home, ask what assistance they need to keep themselves and their children safe. For example:

- 'I'd like to support you and help you to put some actions in place to keep you safe. I'm not a counsellor, but perhaps we can discuss some options and support services if you want to?'
- 'How can I help you today? And how can I help you on an ongoing basis?'
- 'How can the workplace help?'
- 'Is there anyone else you trust who knows about the violence and is supportive of you?'
- 'Have you contacted any services?'
- 'Would you like to contact a service/agency?' Provide them with contacts for family violence services.
- 'Would you like me to contact someone for you, or to stay with you while you call a service?'

6. Recognise that it's not easy to leave

Some people find it very difficult to leave violent situations for a variety of reasons including:

- fear for their lives
- fear of further violence to themselves and/or children
- fear of losing their children – this is often a threat that is made by the person using violence
- financially controlling behaviour and financial dependence can make it very difficult to seek help or to leave
- not wanting to move away from their community or family, or not wanting to move their children, for example, away from their school
- lack of extended family support
- social isolation
- threats made by the partner
- they believe they can protect their children better by staying in the relationship or delaying leaving.

7. Don't try to fix the situation

It is not your responsibility to fix or save the person from their situation. The person experiencing family violence knows the most about what is going on and what will be helpful for them and their children.

You may need support to manage your own feelings about not being able to fix the situation, particularly if the person is someone you know well.

8. Provide information about referral and support services

If you think it is appropriate for the situation, you may want to provide some information about family violence agencies so the person can follow up with professionals when and if they wish to.

Consider the following when making a referral:

- Have a list of phone numbers and websites for family violence services.
- The person may ask you to contact the organisation to make an appointment. If so, it is important to ask what information they are happy for you to provide, and for them to be in the room when you make the call.
- Separation increases the risks associated with family violence. The person's partner may escalate the violence if they know the person is receiving help or thinking about leaving the relationship. As such, it is important to be mindful of safety when using online services and accessing websites. Provide the person with information about eSafety and point out that most family violence support websites and apps have quick exit buttons.

Organisational support

Some organisations may be able to make arrangements to support staff experiencing family violence, including family violence leave, flexible work times and ongoing emotional support.

Organisations may also need to put a safety plan in place which should include actions or procedures for a range of situations, for example, if the partner rings or turns up to the workplace.

It is not your responsibility to fix or save the person from their situation.

¹ McFerran, L. (2011). Safe at home, safe at work: National Domestic Violence and the Workplace Survey. Sydney: Australian National Domestic and Family Violence Clearance.

More information

I need support now

If you feel unsafe at any time, please call emergency services on 000 (triple zero).

For 24/7 crisis support, call:

- **1800RESPECT** on 1800 737 732 for counselling support and information.
- **Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre** (Victoria) on 1800 015 188 for safety support, information and crisis accommodation if needed.

To find other services that can help, visit:

- askizzy.org.au
- www.rav.org.au/resources/services-for-people-affected-by-violence-abuse-and-trauma

How we can help

Relationships Australia Victoria recognises the complexities of family violence, including living in fear and intimidation, and its impacts.

We are funded to provide a range of support and recovery services and programs for women and children who are affected by family violence. Visit www.rav.org.au/affected-family-violence to find out how we can help or download free resources at www.rav.org.au/resources

We also provide training workshops to help professionals and services to understand the impact of family violence and to know how to respond. Visit www.rav.org.au/customised-training to find out more.

About us

Relationships Australia Victoria has over 70 years' experience providing family and relationship support services across Melbourne and Victoria.

We are committed to providing safe, inclusive and accessible services for all people.



We acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners of the lands and waterways of Australia and we support Aboriginal people's right to self-determination and culturally safe services.

We recognise the lifelong impacts of childhood trauma.

We recognise those who had children taken away from them.