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NEWSLETTER

Issue 26

Domestic Violence and the Workplace

Note: Both male and female partners can experience domestic violence. However, this newsletter focuses on the issue of abuse against women.

Recognizing wife abuse as an issue which impacts on the workplace is a new idea for many of us. For years the common myths have supported the belief that wife assault was not a major problem, that it happened only to a few women and that it was a private matter. Somehow women who were being abused by their partners were expected to put it behind them when they came to work and just “get on with the job.” For the most part, abused women remained invisible in the workplace.

Now, with increased public awareness of the pervasiveness of violence against women and its devastating psychological and physical impact, it is time to look within our organizations to see what we can do to support the abused women who are our colleagues, our bosses and our employees. The question we must start asking is, “What can our organization do to ensure that we are part of the solution to a problem which is causing enormous personal pain as well as economic loss through diminished productivity?”

What Can Employers Do?

1. Understand the Problem. Employers should know the basic facts about wife assault:

- Wife abuse is a serious problem. Nearly three in ten Canadian women who have ever been married or in a common-law relationship have been physically or sexually assaulted by a marital partner at some point during the relationship.
- Wife abuse occurs in every socio-economic, ethnic, religious and cultural group and in all forms of relationships including marital, common-law and dating.
- Abuse happens in a repetitive cycle. Once the pattern has been established it is extremely difficult to stop without outside intervention.

- Alcohol and drugs may contribute too but they do not cause violence. Nor is the victim responsible for her partner’s violent behaviour. There is no excuse or justification for abuse and violence.
- Abuse is not a loss of control, it is a means of control. Wife assault is a criminal offence.

2. Provide Information to Employees

- Provide written information on the dynamics and effects of abuse and prevention strategies.
- Compile a list of community resources and how to contact them and make it easily available to employees (attach to pay cheques and hang a poster in the lunchroom).
- Have resources within your organization to help both the abused and the abuser (EFAP, human resources, or occupational & safety nurse).

3. Offer Referrals

- Have key contacts within your organization trained about wife assault and intervention strategies. They may offer both victims and abusers appropriate counselling and referral services.
- Provide prevention oriented services to employees such as parenting education, marriage preparation and self esteem programs.

4. Practice Prevention

- Work to eliminate any organizational policies, procedures and/or practices that implicitly or explicitly put down women.
- Encourage discussion in the workplace about the issue of wife abuse; hold a brown-bag lunch with a video or a local speaker on violence.
- Provide financial support to community-based services for abused women.
- Sponsor a public forum on violence against women in your community.

* Permission to photocopy with credit given to the Domestic Violence Program of Family Service Regina.

Domestic Violence and the Workplace *(continued)*

What Can You Do to Help a Co-worker?

1. Become informed

- Gather information and learn about the cycle, dynamics and effects of wife abuse.
- Become informed about local programs that assist battered women and their children.
- These are the programs that offer safety and provide advocacy, support and other needed services.

2. Lend an Ear

- Letting your co-worker know that you care and are willing to listen may be the best help that you can offer. Assure her that she is not alone.
- Don't force the issue but allow her to confide in you at her own pace. Assure her that any information she shares with you will be kept strictly confidential.
- Believe her. Listen and affirm her feelings without judging her. Never blame her for what is happening or underestimate her fear of potential danger.

3. Be Respectful

- Your co-worker must make her own decisions about her life. Focus support on her right to make her own choices.
- Give her a clear message that she does not cause the abuse and she cannot change her partner's behaviour. Tell her that apologies and promises will not end the violence. You can let her know that you are concerned about her and her children without blaming her for the violence.
- Focus on her strengths. Give her the emotional support she needs (and deserves) to believe that she is a good person. Help her examine her strengths and skills. Emphasize that she deserves a life that is free from violence.

4. Guide Her to Community Services

- When your co-worker asks for advice on what she should do, share the information you have gathered with her privately. Let her know that she is not alone and caring people are available to her.
- Give your co-worker a list of the key community resources that support and work with assaulted women. If the first person she contacts is not helpful, encourage her to find support elsewhere.

Safety for Victims at Work and in Public

Not all of the following suggestions will apply to every situation. Implement those that will help keep you safe.

- Tell your co-workers, employer and/or workplace security about your situation. If possible, provide them with a copy of your protection order and a picture of your ex-partner.
- Keep your protection order with you at all times. If your ex-partner breaches the protection order in any

way, notify the police. A breach of any condition on a protection order is a crime. Not reporting a breach leaves the offender believing you are not serious about having him stay away.

- Whether your ex-partner has keys to your vehicle or not, get an anti-theft device and make it a habit to use it all the time. Always park in an open, well-lit area that is close to your intended destination. Lock your doors whenever you leave your vehicle and always check inside before getting in.
- Devise a safety plan for going to and from work. Get a parking space close to your work. Have someone escort you to and from your car or the bus until you are safely at work or on your way home.
- If you believe you are being followed while driving, do not drive home or try to lose the vehicle tailing you. Stay on well-lit, busy streets. If you have a cellular telephone, call for help. Drive to the nearest police station, hospital emergency, fire hall or busy business and ask (or honk) for help.
- When using public transportation, avoid isolated bus stops, sit by the driver and ask the driver to radio the police if your ex-partner is following you or waiting for you at a stop.
- If it is available to you, consider transferring to a different work site or branch office. If possible, alter your hours of work, change your schedule or vary the times you leave for and from work. Request shifts where you are not coming in or leaving work at night or working alone.
- Designate someone at your workplace to check on you if you do not arrive at work and have not called in. Provide that person with an alternate contact if they cannot reach you.
- A cellular telephone is your link to help in case of an emergency. Program your telephone to allow you one-touch access to help.
- If you are receiving harassing or hang-up calls, use your call display to determine their origin and do not answer those intended to harass you.
- Plan how to get out of your workplace safely in case of an emergency situation.
- Decide with co-workers on a signal, a code word or a phrase to let them know that you need help or to call the police. In an emergency situation, scream or shout out for help to alert co-workers when intervention is needed.

Remember the only way we will end the cycle of violence is through **awareness, education and action.**

Family Services offers confidential professional assistance on a wide variety of personal and work-related issues. For more information on your EAP, call:

1-800-668-9920