

Keeping Watch: Recognizing When a Co-Worker May Be Experiencing Abuse at Home

(Women's Health Matters article)

(Web resource; WHM resource)

http://www.womenshealthmatters.ca/resources/show_res.cfm?ID=44006)

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Many people might recognize signs of domestic abuse in the people closest to them: their friends and family. But they might not see those risk factors in a co-worker. And even if they did, they might be hesitant to speak up about it. The Neighbours, Friends and Families campaign wants to change that.

The campaign, which raises awareness about signs of abuse and about how bystanders can help women at risk of abuse, is expanding to include co-workers among people who may have an opportunity to help. The program is a partnership between the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children, located at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ont., and the Ontario government. For complete information about the Neighbours, Friends and Families campaign, and resources in several languages, visit www.neighboursfriendsandfamilies.ca.

'In Canada we've really been labouring under a misconception that woman abuse is not an issue that impacts the workplace, or it's not an issue that workplaces should be concerned about,' said Barbara MacQuarrie, community director of the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children. MacQuarrie gave a presentation on how to help abused co-workers at the Marion Powell Women's Health Information Centre at Women's College Hospital in Toronto on Nov. 26, 2009.

'We also have a lot of cultural norms and beliefs that support this idea that domestic violence doesn't belong in the workplace. So we really think, mind your own business, what goes on in the home is private,' she said. 'All of these values really feed this idea that it's not for us to deal with, especially not in the workplace.'

Impact on the workplace

The tragic case of Lori Dupont – a nurse who was killed at work by her former partner at Hotel-Dieu Grace Hospital in Windsor, Ont. on Nov. 12, 2005 – made it clear that domestic violence can be an urgent workplace issue.

There is currently no legislation requiring workplaces to be concerned about domestic violence in intimate relationships, but that may be changing in Ontario. Bill 168 proposes changes to the Occupational Health and Safety Act. If passed, it would put responsibilities on employers to try to prevent workplace violence and harassment, including that related to domestic violence.

But woman abuse can have a big impact on any workplace. MacQuarrie pointed out that almost 40 per cent of men in male batterer programs are white-collar workers.

'We sometimes have the impression that woman abuse only happens to certain people, it only happens in certain places,' she said. 'It's just not true. Woman abuse can be present in any workplace.'

The human and economic costs of woman abuse are a significant factor in workplaces. A 1995 study found that the cost of time off work as a result of woman abuse was \$1 billion per year. And MacQuarrie stressed that not only is that figure in 1995 dollars, but is also likely a very conservative estimate.

Woman abuse usually involves a pattern of ongoing, systematic abuse that is really about power and control.

'It can be manifested in a lot of different ways. Physical abuse is the easiest to recognize, but it could be sexual abuse, it could be psychological or emotional abuse, it could be religious, it could be economic,' MacQuarrie said. 'Any place that a person has a vulnerability, if someone takes advantage of that vulnerability in order to control and dominate them, then that is abuse.'

When someone is experiencing abuse, it can affect her work, her workplace and her co-workers in several ways: security, health, performance and productivity can all be affected. Almost three-quarters of women who experience domestic violence are harassed by the abuser while at work. Even if the woman experiencing abuse moves to a new home, the abuser can still locate her at work.

Not only can safe and supportive work environments benefit everyone affected by an abusive situation, but employers and co-workers can make a difference, MacQuarrie said.

Recognize, respond, refer

The key to helping is in the Three Rs: recognize, respond and refer.

Learning to recognize the warning signs and risk factors for woman abuse, and paying attention to the people around you, is the first step. If something seems suspicious, don't dismiss it.

Some warning signs might be more obvious, such as bruises and physical injuries that the victim might minimize or attribute to clumsiness. But other signs may be more subtle, such as:

- her job performance, attendance or punctuality deteriorate or change
- she shows signs of anxiety or fear that seem out of character
- she is upset, distressed or depressed
- she is overly sensitive about talking about her home life, or mentions trouble signs such as alcohol or drug use or bad temper
- she receives more phone calls and appears to react strongly to them, or co-workers may take rude or insulting messages from her abuser
- her current or former partner makes disruptive visits to the workplace

Although many people may feel awkward approaching a co-worker about what they perceive to be a personal matter, MacQuarrie said it's hard to go wrong if the intervention is based on genuine caring and concern. Isolation is a common factor in virtually all abusive situations. Interrupting that isolation may mean overcoming your own hesitation or uncertainty.

Respond to the situation by expressing concern and asking about it, not waiting for her to approach you. Listen to her, but don't judge her, blame her or pressure her. Offer help and support, not advice. Don't

place conditions on your help or support, such as offering to help only if she confronts or leaves the abuser. Encourage her to develop a safety plan, and make her aware of resources.

Finding resources

The Assaulted Women's Helpline at 1-866-863-0511 is anonymous, confidential and available 24 hours a day. Find out about women's shelters, family service agencies and community counselling in your area, and local partner assault programs. The Neighbours, Friends and Families [website](#) offers information and resources on how to recognize and help a co-worker who may be experiencing abuse, how to approach a man who may be an abuser, and safety planning for abused women. The site is available in English and French, and there is also a site designed for aboriginal communities.

MacQuarrie noted that there is unlikely to be a simple solution to the problem, and that it's important to respect the woman's decisions regardless of whether she chooses to leave her partner or not. Support, caring and patience may be the most valuable things you can offer.

Purpose: Consumer information/support; Health information

Information Source: Hospital/Clinic

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