

How to Talk With Someone Who is Being Abused: Guidelines for Coworkers

*I think one of my coworkers may be experiencing domestic violence.
What should I do?*

If you've ever known anyone in an abusive relationship, you know how difficult it can be to decide when to say something and what to say. Victims of domestic violence are often reluctant to discuss their situation, even with close friends and family. While it can be painfully difficult to suspect that a coworker is suffering or in danger, your caring words can help a victim progress toward safety.

Recognize: Signs of Domestic Violence at Work

The first step toward supporting an abused coworker is simply to recognize the signs of domestic violence. Remember to look for a *pattern over time* for a possible link to domestic violence. Indications may include:

- Unexplained absences
- Sudden medical absences
- Leaving early
- Personal calls that interfere with work (upsetting, constant)
- Obvious fatigue
- Inability to provide good service to customers
- Changes in attitude and behavior towards co-workers
- Co-workers receive calls and/or threats from partner or victim
- Tardiness
- Injuries, bruises
- Inability to focus on assigned tasks
- Partner appears at workplace at inappropriate times
- Mistakes with details and the 'little things'
- Sloppiness in dress and makeup
- Not being 'present' or appearing 'vacant' on the job

Respond: What Can You Say That Will Help?

Express your concern. Most people hesitate to speak with someone they think is being abused. It's hard to know what to say, or how to say it. And, of course, there's always the risk you might be wrong. A courteous expression of your concern is a very effective intervention. Most people in abusive relationships appreciate expressions of concern and support—even if they don't respond. Remember, it's

not your job to “save” a person in an abusive relationship; they have to make their own decisions and understand the danger much better than you do.

State what you have noticed or heard. By focusing on facts you can avoid assumptions that may be incorrect. Mention that you have heard them on the phone, or noticed they are leaving early or have been late or you saw bruises – stick to the facts during a conversation. Reactions are often defensive and you can simply express your concern again that something might be wrong.

Listen without judging. People experiencing domestic violence often believe their abusers’ negative messages and feel ashamed, inadequate and afraid of being judged.

Should You Tell Your Supervisor? Suggest that your coworker discuss a violent home situation with a supervisor. You might offer to accompany your coworker. While we all want to respect the rights of others to their privacy, you cannot promise to keep the information confidential. This is an instance when clearly only those with a ‘need to know’ should have information about the suspected or confided abuse. But because abuse can affect both performance and safety in a workplace you may need to speak with security or human resource personnel.

Refer: Offer a Referral to Expert Help

Provide a phone number for a domestic violence service agency in your community. Call your local shelter and ask for a small card with a hotline number—these are available in virtually every community. Counselors are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. If your coworker denies the abuse but you continue to be concerned, you might simply slip a hotline card onto his or her desk. If discussion proves too difficult, leave the card anonymously.

Call **1.800.799.SAFE**, the National Domestic Violence Hotline, to find organizations in your area.