Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Warning Signs Fact Sheets



WHAT IS WORKPLACE VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT?

What should I remember most when learning about warning signs?

You must remember that it can be very difficult to know when a person is going to be violent. While not all people will show the following signs, these types of behaviours and physical signs can serve as warning signs that a situation could turn violent. Always take these behaviours “in context”. Look for multiple warning signs and for signs of escalation (the behaviours are getting worse).

If you are concerned about a person who shows some or all of the identified characteristics, take action. Report your concern to your supervisor, or human resources department.

WHAT ARE WARNING SIGNS OF A TROUBLED PERSON OR EMPLOYEE?

It is much easier to prevent violence by recognising the signs and trying to stop small incidents than trying to deal with the aftermath of a major crisis.

It is extremely important to understand that the following behaviours do not mean a person will become violent, but they may indicate that the person is experiencing high levels of stress. Each situation is unique and professional judgement or outside assistance may be necessary to determine if intervention is necessary.

Always take particular note if:

- There is a change in their behaviour patterns.
- The frequency and intensity of the behaviours are disruptive to the work environment.
- The person is exhibiting many of these behaviours, rather than just a few.

Warning signs include:

- Crying, sulking or temper tantrums.
- Excessive absenteeism or lateness.
- Pushing the limits of acceptable conduct or disregarding the health and safety of others.
- Disrespect for authority.
- Increased mistakes or errors, or unsatisfactory work quality.

- Refusal to acknowledge job performance problems.
- Faulty decision making.
- Testing the limits to see what they can get away with.
- Swearing or emotional language.
- Handles criticism poorly.
- Making inappropriate statements.
- Forgetfulness, confusion, or distraction.
- Inability to focus.
- Blaming others for mistakes.
- Complaints of unfair personal treatment.
- Talking about the same problems repeatedly without resolving them.
- Insistence that they are always right.
- Misinterpretation of communications from supervisors or co-workers.
- Social isolation.
- Poor personal hygiene.
- Sudden and/or unpredictable change in energy level.
- Complaints of unusual and/or non-specific illnesses.
- Holds grudges, especially against his or her supervisor. Verbalizes hope that something negative will happen to the person against whom they have the grudge.

ARE THERE PHYSICAL SIGNS THAT A PERSON MAY ACT OUT?

Sometimes it is not what a person says, but what their body is “doing”. Use caution if you see someone who shows one or more of the following “non-verbal” signs or body language.

- Flushed or pale face.
- Sweating.
- Pacing, restless, or repetitive movements.
- Signs of extreme fatigue (e.g., dark circles under the eyes).
- Trembling or shaking.
- Clenched jaws or fists.
- Exaggerated or violent gestures.
- Change in voice.
- Loud talking or chanting.
- Shallow, rapid breathing.
- Scowling, sneering or use of abusive language.
- Glaring or avoiding eye contact.
- Violating your personal space (they get too close).

WHAT ARE OTHER WARNING SIGNS?

In some cases, there has been a clear pattern of warning signs before a violent incident. When you can, take note of:

History of violence

- Fascinated with incidents of workplace violence.
- Shows an extreme interest in, or obsession with, weapons.
- Demonstrated violence towards inanimate objects.
- Evidence of earlier violent behaviour.

Threatening behaviour

- States intention to hurt someone (can be verbal or written).
- Holds grudges.
- Excessive behaviour (e.g. phone calls, gift giving).

- Escalating threats that appears well-planned.
- Preoccupation with violence.

Intimidating behaviour

- Argumentative or uncooperative.
- Displays unwarranted anger.
- Impulsive or easily frustrated.
- Challenges peers and authority figures.

Increase in personal stress

- An unreciprocated romantic obsession.
- Serious family or financial problems.
- Recent job loss or personal loss.

Negative personality characteristics

- Suspicious of others.
- Believes they are entitled to something.
- Cannot take criticism.
- Feels victimized.
- Shows a lack of concern for the safety or well-being of others.
- Blames others for their problems or mistakes.
- Low self-esteem.

Marked changes in mood or behaviour

- Extreme or bizarre behaviour.
- Irrational beliefs and ideas.
- Appears depressed or expresses hopelessness or heightened anxiety.
- Marked decline in work performance.
- Demonstrates a drastic change in belief systems.

Socially isolated

- History of negative interpersonal relationships.
- Few family or friends.
- Sees the company as a “family”.
- Has an obsessive involvement with their job.

Abuses substances, such as drugs or alcohol

WHAT CAN I DO IF I AM CONCERNED?

Take action, especially if you feel your safety or the safety of others is threatened.

Follow your workplace’s policy and procedures for responding to violence and harassment, including reporting by witnesses.

If you are a worker, you can also report your concerns to your supervisor, human resources department, or the person designated by your organization.

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