

Intimate partner violence: Workplace response is long overdue

By **Dr. Jennifer Swanberg**
Columnist: Work/life issues

"It started with phone calls, ... the kids are sick; you need to come home. ... (Then) he'd come sit and watch, and he'd order something and he'd sit there for hours. My boss said he really has a problem. I'd go out there and say you need to leave, I'm working. ... Sometimes he'd leave; sometimes he would not."

—female employee

"He called every five minutes. ... And I'm not picking up (the phone) because I'm busy, and they're trying to answer the phones, and it was creating friction between me and the staff, with physicians standing right there. I wanted to crawl under the table, I was so embarrassed, but he just keeps calling me back, at an emergency room where you can't have the phone off the hook. And that shot my stress level sky-high. I'm over there trying to sew somebody up, you know, trying to deal with business, and he's calling."

— female employee

In June 2005, Kimberly Price was shot to death by her estranged husband as she was walking into her workplace, a local beauty salon, according to the *Daily Independent*, the local newspaper in Ashland, Ky. Apparently, he had been waiting for her to come to work that morning. Her friends and coworkers indicated that she had been afraid of him because of his violent tendencies and his anger over the impending divorce. For many of us, we have compartmentalized partner violence as a crime that occurs only in private. Although it is true that much of the violence among intimates does occur at home in private, sometimes it overflows into the workplace. While the situation mentioned previously may seem like an extreme example of what may happen when intimate partner violence flows over into the workplace, all forms of intimate partner violence have significant effects on the workplace, employees and customers.

Intimate partner violence not only directly affects the primary employed target, for example through direct harassment at the workplace, but perpetrators may harass coworkers and customers. Such behaviors create stress for everyone in the workplace, resulting in lost productivity or employee turnover. The National Center for Injury Prevention and Control estimates that businesses spend \$727.8 million annually on the costs associated with lost productivity. This figure includes an estimated loss of 7.9 million paid workdays per year. These figures do not include the employer health care costs associated with partner violence. Despite its startling costs to businesses and devastating effects on employees and customers, businesses have been slow to recognize intimate partner violence as a form of workplace violence and as an imperative workplace issue.

Partner violence disrupts employed victims' job performance in several ways. The perpetrator may try to prevent the victim from reaching the workplace on time or at all. Tactics may include the perpetrator depriving the victim of sleep, hiding car keys, or injuring the victim, causing repeated need to call in sick or report to work late. Stalking is another tactic used by perpetrators that interferes with employed victims' jobs. "Workplaces are popular places to stalk women (victims), because the work location often remains

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unchanged even when she may have moved,” said Dr. TK Logan, UK College of Medicine professor and nationally recognized scholar on stalking and women’s victimization. “On-the-job stalking may take the form of the perpetrator waiting for her outside the workplace, or showing up and harassing her at work.” As illustrated by the two quotes at the beginning of this article taken from research conducted by Dr. Logan and myself, job harassment tactics can be quite stressful for the victim, as she may fear for her safety, fear she will lose their job, or fear humiliation. “At first, stalking incidents may not seem serious because it is often comprised of smaller, less-concerning behaviors. However, when considered as part of a pattern of behavior, people finally understand the dangers associated with stalking.”

Incidents of partner violence entering the workplace are difficult to measure, for a range of reasons. However, a few studies have tried to capture the occurrence of partner violence as a form of workplace violence. The recent Survey of Workplace Violence Prevention conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports half of employers with 1,000 or more employees in the United States experienced at least one incident of workplace violence within the previous 12 months. Twenty-five percent of these reported workplace violence cases were related to intimate partner violence. The National Crime Victimization Survey found that during a four-year period, an average of 18,000 people annually were assaulted by an intimate partner at work. Other research suggests that employees are almost as likely to be victimized at work by an intimate partner as by a coworker, and that women killed on the job are more likely to be killed by a partner than by a coworker.

It seems to me that enough is known for action in the workplace. At the very least, employers should consider a workplace violence policy that includes how best to manage the associated consequences of intimate partner violence when it flows over into the workplace. Yet according to The Survey of Workplace Violence Prevention, only 30 percent of workplaces have workplace violence policies, and less than half of them include partner violence as a form of workplace violence.

What’s a workplace to do? There are several steps that an employer can take, depending on its size, commitment to the issue, and resources. Ideally, employers need a workplace violence policy, and it needs to contain specific implications for partner violence as a workplace violence issue. Partner workplace violence policies should focus on prevention, protection and assistance. Experts recommend that workplace violence policies include a zero-tolerance policy for any kind of violent behavior, including partner violence, and a procedure for confidential reporting of violence-related matters. Dr. Logan and I recommend that workplace violence policies be explicit about identifying partner violence-related behaviors that are prohibited in the workplace and on its property. Moreover, it should contain specific procedures that will be taken if such behaviors have been reported or discovered. Finally, the policy should create a set of clear and simple steps that should be taken by supervisors, managers, security personnel, and coworkers if partner violence flows into the workplace. All employees should be educated about partner violence as a part of workplace violence policies and procedures.

Intimate partner violence is a multifaceted and complex social problem that requires response from multiple systems to adequately protect its victims and to eradicate it. Workplaces can be a part of this response by creating workplace violence policies that are inclusive of intimate partner violence as a form of workplace violence.

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What Businesses Can Do

1. Establish a workplace violence policy that includes specifications for partner violence.
2. Focus on prevention, protection and assistance.
3. Identify a clear set of procedures to be taken by managers, supervisors, security personnel and co-workers when partner violence overflows into the workplace.
4. Establish a zero-tolerance policy for all forms of violent behavior, including partner violence behaviors. Be specific about related behaviors prohibited in the workplace and on its premises. Specify procedures take place if violent behaviors are reported or discovered.
5. Educate all employees about partner violence and its implications for the workplace.