



**recognising and  
responding to  
family violence  
for workplaces**



**Engender  
Equality**

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# Introduction

Family violence can have devastating consequences on individuals, communities, businesses and society. It impacts, psychological and physical well-being, housing, financial security, and performance and safety at work. Exposure (including hearing or seeing abusive acts and being witness to the aftermath of violence) negatively impacts on children. Anyone can be a victim of family violence and family violence has a negative ripple effect across our communities. It impacts much more widely than just on the individuals involved.

To support people who are experiencing family violence workplaces need to:

- ensure their workplaces protect workers from violence, abuse or threats at work
- provide supportive conditions, such as appropriate leave, access to counselling and flexible work arrangements
- provide support to access specialist services.

Workplaces also need to be able to intervene appropriately to ensure the safety for all workers. This includes non-judgemental support to workers who use violence and abuse.



**While both men and women are subject to family violence, it is women who experience the most severe and ongoing forms of abuse and its impact. Due to the greater frequency and impact of violence against women, we often refer to women when talking about the impact of family violence.**

# What is family violence?

Family violence often emerges as a pattern of behaviours where power and control are used by a person to intimidate their partner or ex-partner, resulting in fear. It can start or escalate during a relationship or after separation.

Sometimes the behaviour can be understood as overtly criminal but at other times it is more subtle and the patterns of abusive behaviour can be difficult to identify. Family Violence is illegal in all states and territories in Australia.

Tasmania is covered by the Family Violence Act 2004.

The law refers to the following types of actions or behaviour committed (directly or indirectly) by a spouse or partner (current or former):

- assault, including sexual assault
- threats, coercion, intimidation or verbal abuse
- abduction
- stalking and bullying
- economic abuse (ie withholding or controlling finances and/or disposing of property)
- emotional abuse or intimidation
- contravening an external family violence order, a Family Violence Order (FVO), an interim FVO (IFVO) or a Police FVO (PFVO)
- damage to property (including property owned by an affected child)
- attempting or threatening to carry out any of the above.

*You could be experiencing family violence if your partner or ex-partner is:*

- *criticising, humiliating and insulting you, or calling you names*
- *stopping you, or making it difficult for you to see friends and relatives*
- *depriving you of basic necessities such as money, food and shelter*
- *making you have sex against your will*
- *frightening you, for example by damaging your house, furniture or possessions*
- *harming or threatening to harm your pets*
- *threatening to hurt you*
- *shaking, pushing or shoving you*
- *denying you access to ceremonies, land or family, or preventing you from practising your beliefs*
- *slapping, kicking or punching you*
- *using a weapon such as a knife to threaten you*
- *threatening to have your Visa revoked, or criticising your cultural background*
- *checking your letters, emails and phone calls*
- *undermining your parenting*

# What has family violence got to do with workplaces?

Increasing numbers of Australian workplaces are introducing family violence workplace entitlements. Workplaces play a unique opportunity to help people who are living with violence and they have a responsibility to act if the effects of violence are flowing into someone's work life.

A workplace response to family violence is required when:

- a worker discloses that they are worried about their safety or experiencing family violence
- there is a risk to a worker or co-workers from their partner or ex-partner
- there is a performance issue related to the impacts of family violence
- a worker seeks flexible working arrangements or leave because of their partner or ex-partner's behaviour.

Impacts of family violence at work may include;

- being prevented or delayed from getting to work making the employee persistently late
- absenteeism without explanation
- needing time off beyond usual life commitments
- partner visiting at work in inappropriate ways
- receiving repeated upsetting phone calls/emails/texts
- employee staying at work beyond what is reasonable
- changes in quality of work performance
- being obsessed with time or needing to always leave on time
- appearing withdrawn and isolated
- making last minute cancellations
- apologising for a partner or family members behaviour
- partner seems controlling over work schedule – i.e. dropping off and picking up from work

# How can workplaces prevent family violence?

Training will help to address the practices, attitudes, norms and behaviours that underpin and create family violence and disrespectful working relationships.

Workplaces should commit to:

- promote gender equality in the workplace and understand the cultural and attitudinal drivers of family violence
- educate and raise awareness on the impacts of family violence
- build manager and worker capacity to recognise and respond appropriately
- support workers who are experiencing family violence, for example through access to conditions such as Family Violence leave
- take a 'no tolerance' stance towards bullying, harassment and discrimination in the workplace
- create a culture where workers can confidently take bystander action if they see or hear about sexism, harassment, discrimination or violence in the workplace
- strengthen positive, equal and respectful relationships in the workplace

# How do we support our staff?

All staff have a role to play when they become aware that one of their workers or co-workers may be experiencing family violence. The model for responding appropriately is often referred to as RECOGNISE, RESPOND AND REFER.

## RECOGNISE

Recognising family violence is not straightforward. Everyone's experience of family violence is unique and how people manage their experience will differ between individuals. Many people who are experiencing family violence are not able to recognise the abuse themselves and so it becomes crucial that workplaces have a high level of understanding of the various presentations and experiences of family violence.

People may not want to leave or end their relationship with an abusive partners. They may want to leave but not be able to. All of these aspects need to be understood by workplaces.

## RESPOND

When a person discloses family violence your immediate response and attitude makes a difference. By asking about family violence you may:

- help someone to access a support service and keep safe
- help them to restore a sense of self-worth.

Your role is not to be a counsellor. It is not your problem to "fix". As a co-worker, you can provide support and options.

## WHEN A PERSON DISCLOSES FAMILY VIOLENCE, YOUR IMMEDIATE RESPONSE AND ATTITUDE MAKES A DIFFERENCE.

### Listen

Being listened to can be an empowering experience for a person who has been abused. Find a quiet space, make eye contact (where culturally appropriate) and nod, so your client knows you are hearing them.

### Validate

Being believed is a powerful experience for someone who has experienced long-term abuse. Validating the person's experience is vital—for example: *'That experience must have been frightening'*, or *'I understand it is difficult for you to talk about this'*.

### Emphasise the unacceptability of violence

Use statements like, *'Violence is unacceptable—you do not deserve to be treated this way'*.

Avoid suggesting that the victim is responsible for the violence or that they are able to control the violence by changing their behaviour. Do not ask *'Why don't you leave?'* *'What could you have done to avoid this situation?'* or *'Why did he hit you?'*

### Ensure confidentiality

Your client may suffer additional abuse if their partner suspects that the abuse has been disclosed.



## General questions may be relevant:

- is everything ok at home/with your partner or former partner?
- is there anything happening outside of work that is affecting your wellbeing?
- is there anything else that is upsetting you?

## More specific questions may be useful:

- I've noticed that you've been coming to work much later/earlier than usual. Is everything ok at home?
- I noticed that when you took that phone call from your partner, you sounded quite distressed, and afterwards you weren't your usual self – would you like to talk about it?
- Does your partner treat you in a way that makes you feel scared?
- Are you ever frightened of your partner?
- Are you concerned about your safety, or the safety of your children or family?

When you respond to their disclosure, it is critical that you know and understand the limits of what you can do, if in doubt seek help and support.

### Your role does not include:

- taking on a counselling role
- giving advice
- making decisions for the worker.

Misunderstanding your role can do more harm than good to their situation.

**The point of leaving and after a relationship has ended, is when violence often escalates. Suggesting someone leave an abusive relationship can put them at greater risk.**

## WHEN SOMEONE TELLS THEY ARE IN A CONTROLLING OR ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP, YOU CAN:

- ✓ **Listen to what they have to say.**
- ✓ **Believe what they tell you:** it may have taken a lot for the person to talk to you. People are much more likely to cover up or downplay the abuse, rather than to make it up or exaggerate. You might find it hard to imagine someone you know could behave abusively. But the person who is using abusive behaviour will probably show you a very different side to the side their partner sees.
- ✓ **Take the abuse seriously:** abuse can be damaging both physically and emotionally. Don't underestimate the danger the person may be in.
- ✓ **Help the person to recognise the abuse** and understand how it may be affecting them or their children.
- ✓ **Tell the person you think they have been brave** in being able to talk about the abuse, and in being able to keep going despite the abuse.
- ✓ **Help to build the person's confidence in themselves.**
- ✓ **Help the person to understand that the abuse is not their fault** and that no-one deserves to be abused, no matter what they do. Let them know that the way their partner is treating them is wrong. For example, *'No-one, not even your partner, has the right to mistreat you'*
- ✓ **Help them to protect themselves:** talk to the person about how they are protecting themselves and always encourage them to call 000 if they feel they need to.
- ✓ **Offer practical assistance** like minding the children for a while, cooking a meal, offering a safe place to stay, transport or to accompany them to an appointment where they can access appropriate support.
- ✓ **Respect their right to make their own decisions,** even if you don't agree with them. Respect their cultural or religious values and beliefs.
- ✓ **Maintain some level of regular contact:** having an opportunity to talk regularly to a supportive friend or relative can be very important.
- ✓ **Tell them about the services available:** if they call a service, they can just get support and information, they won't be pressured into leaving the relationship if they do not want to.
- ✓ **Keep supporting them after they have left the relationship:** the period of separation could be a dangerous time for them as the abuse may increase. They may need practical support and encouragement to help them establish a new life and recover from the abuse. They could also seek counselling or join a support group.

## Follow up

You should follow up regularly to see how your co-worker is coping, or whether further steps could be taken to ensure their safety and wellbeing.

## REFER

There are a range of support services available for people experiencing or perpetrating family violence.

Some of helpful services might include:

- Specialist family violence services
- Accommodation or housing services
- Financial assistance
- Medical services
- Counselling or a psychologist
- Children's services

\*Please see a list of relevant services at the end of this resource.

## Self-care

Acknowledge your own limitations. You are not able to control someone else's response towards violence, you are only able to offer your support.

Consider seeking support for yourself, as it isn't easy to hear that someone is being abused.

# When a person is abusive.

Non-judgemental support to people who use abusive behaviour is essential.

However, it is important that any workers who perpetrate violence and abuse understand that while support will be offered to them, any act of violence, bullying or harassment at work is unacceptable and will not be tolerated.

## RECOGNISE

You may become aware of a co-worker being a perpetrator of family violence through:

- a worker's self-disclosure, with a request for support
- your own (or a colleague's) observations
- disclosure by someone else (for example, the victim, a bystander or the Police)
- a disciplinary management process such as an investigation, bullying, harassment or discrimination allegation, or a formal grievance procedure.

## **Other signs in the workplace**

People who use abusive behaviour may use work time and resources to be abusive towards their current or former partner. Signs may include:

- excessive calling or texting their partner
- becoming angered after talking to their partner
- criticising their partner using traditional gender stereotypes or gender roles to put their partner down or "joke" about their partner
- showing signs of stalking, harassing or monitoring their partner
- using work IT systems to access private information about their current or former partner

- acting abusively towards other staff.

Such behaviours are never acceptable and should not be tolerated by the workplace.

## **RESPOND**

### **Offering support**

It is important that all dealings with people who use violence and abuse are handled sensitively.

Workers who think they may be perpetrating family violence are strongly encouraged to seek support.

If a worker discloses violence to you, they are showing enormous trust and it is important to maintain this trust.

When responding to a person who uses abuse, or an alleged perpetrator:

- do not judge
- consider the risk to the safety of others
- consider the security of information of others
- maintain confidentiality where appropriate
- continue to offer support.

## **REFER**

\* Please see a list of relevant services at the end of this resource.

# How can I be part of the solution?

At our workplace, in our community and at home we can...  
(note examples of actions you can take)

<p><b>1. Challenge condoning of violence against women</b></p>	<p><b>2. Promote women's independence and decision making</b></p>
<p><b>3. Challenge gendered stereotypes and roles</b></p>	<p><b>4. Strengthen positive, equal and respectful relationships</b></p>

# Suggested referral pathways.

## Men's Referral Service

P: 1300 766 491

National men's family violence telephone counselling, information and referral service for: men who are using controlling behaviour towards a partner or family member & women seeking information about men's use of family violence.

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## 1800 RESPECT

P: 1800 737 732 (National number)

E: [www.1800respect.org.au/](http://www.1800respect.org.au/)

National 24/7 crisis telephone support and counselling service for people affected by family violence.

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In an emergency call: 000