

Hitting home

Employers have not even begun to wake up
to the hidden cost of domestic violence.

Melissa Morbeck and Matthew Lewry, from the
Corporate Alliance Against Domestic Violence, outline
what every organisation needs to know and why

The charity, the Corporate Alliance Against Domestic Violence (The Alliance), often cites the phrase – ‘domestic violence – it’s everyone’s business’. The double-edge to this line is not always immediately apparent to everyone, but in this article we argue how critical it is for businesses to understand the effects of domestic violence and how they can support employees experiencing it.

The sheer scale of domestic violence (DV) across the world is horrifying. According to the World Health Organization, domestic abuse and violence is the greatest cause of injury and illness to women worldwide. At least one in three women are beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused by an intimate partner¹. In the UK, one in four women and one in six men will experience DV at some point during their lives: it affects people regardless of their race, creed, gender, class, ideology, education level, or income; no one is immune.

DV doesn’t merely encompass physical assault; it includes the use of power and control of a psychological, financial and emotional kind, as well. It is sobering and I think very revealing to consider your own peers, and the likelihood that with only limited outward signs, it is entirely possible they could be suffering extensively behind closed doors.

As counsellors and health professionals we might often think that we can identify individuals struggling with trauma; but would you be surprised to know that 75 per cent of DV victims are targeted at work²? Or that in the US one third of domestic murders are committed on workplace grounds³? Or (also in the US) that, of employees who are absent for several days from work, 33 per cent are likely to be absent as a result of domestic violence³? However, it’s not just about the suffering employee being injured by the perpetrator; the business itself is directly damaged too, and by extension the entire economy. In a report written by Professor Sylvia Walby and published by the Women and Equality Unit, Department of Trade and Industry, it was estimated that the total damage done to the UK economy is £1.9 billion per annum⁴. Consider the financial impact in your own organisation as a result of absenteeism from DV or through the loss of top talent due to depression, resignation and even suicide caused by DV? It may be impossible to quantify the precise figure, but it is more than any responsible business can afford.

Let’s take an example: a well-known high street bank has around 140,000 employees (around 70,000 of whom are female). If we take a conservative estimate that 10 per cent of the possible 25 per cent of women working there

are enduring abuse, and if we assume an average salary of £30,000, if one single week of effective productivity is lost due to DV, we are looking at a loss of £1,009,615 per annum.

Duty of care

In addition to the moral and business case for addressing DV in the workplace, there are legal obligations that must be understood. A well-run business understands that it has a duty not merely to consider employees as workers but also as people. In the same way that we make allowances and provide help to deal with bereavement, physical illness or childcare, DV is an affliction that falls under the auspices of the Health and Safety at Work Act, 1974⁵.

In short, employers have a legal duty to ensure the health and wellbeing of their employees in the workplace. Consider, for example, that the workplace is the one location outside the home where a stalker or person who harasses can *always* know where their intended victim will be. How can an employee work to best effect when they know that their tormentor could be outside, waiting for them to leave, or waiting for them to pick up their office phone? If a business has no procedures in place to identify harassment at work, then The Alliance would highlight that that business is failing in its duty of care. That business may even be held liable for any mental or physical trauma experienced by an employee.

There are, then, three compelling and interlinked reasons for businesses to take note of DV and make an effort to deal with the problem:

- 1 A moral duty of care
- 2 The financial impact for the company
- 3 The need to comply with the law (Health and Safety at Work Act 1974).

Therapists are often the first to respond to those experiencing DV, and will need to use all their training and experience to spot warning signs and make the appropriate referrals or initiate the best treatment for the client.

Warning signs

There are many warning signs that could indicate to the attentive observer that an employee is experiencing DV. Most obviously, of course, there may be an indication of physical injury, which the client may be reluctant to explain. However, the signs of violence are often hidden beneath clothing on the torso. The employee may also have an

increase in unexplained absences from work. Productivity and results may drop off rapidly. Behaviour, especially interpersonal behaviour, can alter significantly. The employee may dress differently, use unusually heavy make-up, they may stay late, or come in early, and may never take a vacation. The employee may seek isolation at work, and stop socialising with colleagues during or outside work hours.

Of course, we all have 'off days' but what we are describing is the concept of sustained behavioural change. Also, there may be visits to the office, repeated text messages, or phone calls from a partner which often frightens the employee, and members of staff who witness this distress.

Establishing trust

From our work at The Alliance we are aware that so often it is trust that is destroyed for the person who endures DV. A workplace that promotes the importance of their employee's wellbeing provides an environment where people do often find the courage to share their experience with a friend, a colleague, occupational health advisor or a counsellor. If the employee does self-disclose, it is imperative that they are offered pathways to be safe and free of violence.

A part of this often fraught journey is seeking an understanding of why the violence occurred and unpicking the emotional devastation that has been wrought. Physical injury can be identified and treated relatively easily, but the psychological damage inflicted by DV is arguably worse.

Psychological illnesses commonly shown by DV victims include unipolar depression, with 80 per cent of people who endure domestic abuse presenting with depression, 30 per cent of whom will present with PTSD symptoms. There may also be the inability to trust others, low self-esteem and suicidal ideation. You may not be appropriately placed to deal with the most severe ramifications of DV but, as a workplace counsellor, you can and should know who the individual should be referred to.

Key concepts for workplace counsellors dealing with domestic violence:

- 1 Confidentiality** – in a self-disclosure situation, do you and your employer have guidelines in place to cover confidentiality beyond your standard counselling agreements? In what situations is there a direct danger to the employee for which the employer would be liable? In which situations should you consider contacting the police or social services?
- 2 Assessing risk** – if there is a risk to the workplace or to a child's safety, you must involve the correct authorities*. It is imperative that the person enduring DV understands these risk issues and is part of the decision-making process where possible.
- 3 Appointments schedule** – how often are you seeing the client? Is it often enough? If you treat someone for 45 minutes and make progress, what are the inherent risks of not seeing a DV sufferer or perpetrator for a fortnight? In short-term counselling, there has to be a limit on the number of sessions, but also we may need to have a flexible approach.
- 4 Treatment methods** – depression is a big part of DV but is not the only damaging symptom. Therapy and CBT are not always your most appropriate treatment options. Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing Therapy (EMDR) is a tremendous tool in a secure setting; however, what if this tool unlocks hidden traumatic memories without guided support and care at hand?
- 5 Avoid normalising an abusive relationship** – the greatest success you can have in treating a client experiencing DV is to have the individual reject any shame or guilt over the situation and begin to address the underlying causes that have led to the situation.
- 6 Raising awareness** – is your workplace aware of the risks posed by DV? Do employees know who to go to if they wish to self-disclose or raise a concern in confidence about a fellow employee's welfare?

*It must be made clear to the client in contracting at the beginning of therapy and before any disclosure is made that there is a 'must' in the company protocols and procedures in regard to contacting appropriate authorities if it is decided there is a risk.

Working with organisations

One of The Alliance's services is to provide advice and consultancy on how to institute effective awareness-raising programmes within organisations. We liaise with different departments in a company, be it human resources (HR), occupational health (OH), or Diversity and Inclusion (DNI), to discuss the realities of the lives of their employees.

In these meetings, we often hear the words: 'Domestic violence doesn't happen to our employees', and we'll run awareness-raising sessions with companies' staff and engage with them to come forward and talk about their own experiences of DV. Employers are often shocked to learn that well over 25 per cent of their female staff may be enduring psychological or physical terror.

It is not uncommon for individuals who have experienced DV to have a nervous breakdown, experience PTSD and memory loss. A good employer responding to this will provide immediate counselling support as well as specialist PTSD treatment. Employees who are given time off and supported by their employer often speak of a bond of trust with their employer that aids their recovery and creates great loyalty.

Self-care

Emotionally, it can be hard to maintain control and approach such situations from a professional, detached perspective. The critical element is that when we listen to such stories, we remember that there are boundaries and that we are not there to solve all of an individual's problems but rather to empower them to act.

Despite many years of working with DV sufferers, I (Melissa) still have to make an effort to become emotionally and physically separate from each self-disclosure. This is not a deficiency; I refer to this as 'changing the channel in my brain'. My personal method of doing this is just to walk, leaving the place we met – changing the atmosphere and stimulating all of my body. I know that you will have found your own process for dealing with emotionally affecting clients.

Conclusion

A long time ago, a workplace I know, helped a woman who had been working for a large commercial real estate development firm, but after experiencing years of DV, ended up living rough or in shelters. She had no money and no viable economic means of supporting herself, even though she was well-educated to master's degree level. She had thought about suicide.

However, an exceptional workplace later hired her, made sure she had a purpose, a meaning and was part of the workplace community. After she self-disclosed her DV, she had access to first-class physical and psychological care, lasting well over a year, with time off to attend meetings. So much of her recovery came from the professional care of counsellors and psychologists. The woman thrived – and learned she was safe and that she was capable of living a life free of violence, shame and fear. That woman was me. No one thought it could happen to

someone like me – but it happens every day in every part of the world to every kind of person.

Workplace counsellors and specialists are so often the first respondents to DV, and hold knowledge that can influence how an organisation's procedures address DV at work. To reduce the impact of DV, we have to work together – this is true for the individual, the organisation and, on a macro level, across the nation. Helping to establish holistic processes and demonstrating best practice will help not only your clients, colleagues and employers, but in the longer term, it forms a crucial part of a worldwide effort to stop DV. Understanding DV saves lives, saves money and builds a better future – and truly, 'it's everyone's business'.

References

- 1 UNIFEM, Not a minute more: ending violence against women. New York: United Nations Development Fund for Women; 2003.
- 2 Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence. Workplace Statistics: 2007 http://www.caepv.org/getinfo/facts_stats.php?factsec=3.
- 3 Tiesman H, Gurka K, Konda S, Coben J, Amandus HE. Workplace homicides among US women: the role of intimate partner violence. *Annals of Epidemiology*. 2012; 22(4):277–284.
- 4 Walby S. The cost of domestic violence. London: Department of Trade and Industry Women and Equality Unit; 2004.
- 5 Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, Section 2 (1): 'It shall be the duty of every employer to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of all his employees.'

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