

Workplace Violence: When You Are Concerned About a Co-Worker

Meet Jack...

Jack has been in your department for 2 years. He's about 35. You know that he is going through a divorce and he doesn't have any children. He's always been quiet and kept to himself at lunch, so you don't know much more about him. Recently, there seems to be a change. He has been talking a lot, complaining about his ex-wife and he appears to be wearing the same clothes day after day. His interruptions are beginning to interfere with your work. You try joking with him about his state of mind, but he doesn't seem to get the hint. You start talking to co-workers about him and sharing bits of information about his changes in behavior. They say he is annoying them also.

What does this story have to do with workplace violence? Why are Jack's behaviors and the reactions of his co-workers important to every employee in any type of workplace?

Let's begin by defining what violence really is

We understand it when it's physical, but the fact is, violence can also be verbal and/or emotional, or a combination of all three. Violence can involve threatening, harassing or be directly invasive. It can be toward a person or property. It can be on a continuum from mildly annoying comments to more severe stalking or other actions. When someone is being violent or about to be violent, they give off certain signals and others respond with certain mind and body reactions.

Now here's an important question.

What's the difference between the actions of someone just having a bad day and of someone who may have the potential for violence? There are warning signs. Unfortunately, people often choose to ignore or discount these signs until it's too late.

A closer look at workplace violence.

Employee violence in the workplace, whether it's against property (such as throwing a phone at the cubicle wall) or against people (verbally harassing, shoving, hitting or even killing) is really the end result of a series of events. They start as small incidents and become more frequent and more uncomfortable for all involved. As the employee begins to exhibit changes in behavior toward the job, towards co-workers, managers and/or the company, colleagues begin to notice these changes. When the incidents first begin, they may be considered small and unimportant; we ignore them or chalk them up to somebody being under a lot of pressure, or just "weird." We all tend to "silo" our intuitive thoughts, i.e. not connecting a string of incidents or clues that might allow us to come to a realization earlier.

But here's the thing: violence doesn't come out of the blue

Knowing that this is the case, what can you do and when should you do it? Here are a few tips:

- **Don't ignore, discount or minimize your "gut" feelings and reactions.** We tend to say "Oh, that's just Jack." But somewhere inside, you are feeling that there is a change – that Jack is becoming strange or different, angrier, more depressed or "I can't quite put my finger on it, but something is different."
- **If you're comfortable doing so, talk to Jack.** Ask him if everything is okay. Be empathic.
- **Let someone else know, confidentially, that you are having these concerns.** Share them with key people in your company like supervisors or the manager and Human Resources.
- **If you're afraid to come forward, consider this.** Perhaps you've heard rumors of people being fired, or there being retaliation because someone "told on someone." Be assured that trained counselors are available through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to consult with you and to help you plan caring and strategic steps within your company.
- **No concern is too small to mention.** No one will criticize or judge you if you come forward with a concern about a co-worker's well-being.
- **Sometimes people need help and don't know how to ask for it.** Seeking advice about a worrisome co-worker is different than being "out to get" someone. You may actually help him or her by bringing the behavior to the attention of others. The behavior could indirectly be a "cry for help."
- **Check out your workplace policy and procedures.** Most companies have zero tolerance for violence. It may give you guidance on where to turn.

Tell your manager or HR about your concerns.

Positive things will happen if you do. Management and HR can take appropriate and confidential action to further investigate any potential problems. If necessary, they can directly address concerns with the employee and make sure that he or she is getting help. It is critical for management to be involved and that potential workplace safety issues are addressed as soon as possible.

Companies take the threat of violence in the workplace very seriously. We all want to work in a safe and predictable environment. While policies, procedures and enhanced security all have important roles to play in keeping the workplace safe, it's also important for employees to be aware of what's going on around them. **Early identification is the best form of prevention.**

Your EAP is here for you.

We're available to talk 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

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