



Domestic violence

The impact on business

With one in twenty New Zealand women assaulted by an intimate partner in the past year, domestic violence is in the workplace and it's bad for business, says Holly Carrington. In order to help employees suffering from domestic abuse, retain them, and maximise productivity, employers need the right policy and supports in place.

Details about people mentioned in this article have been changed so that they cannot be identified.

Anna was a highly competent, highly skilled worker who got on well with her patients, colleagues, and boss where she had worked for 15 years. Then she began dating and moved in with a co-worker who soon became jealous, possessive and violent.

Anna's boyfriend began to check up on Anna at work throughout the day. Anna began coming to work late, and sometimes missed work altogether. She was often preoccupied, worried, and forgetful. Anna was too ashamed to tell anyone what was going on. She feared that her boss would see her as unprofessional for having a relationship with their maintenance supervisor, but feared even more that she would not be believed.

None of her colleagues asked Anna what was going on. Her boss told her that he was becoming increasingly worried about her performance, that he didn't want to lose someone with so much experience, but that she needed to improve her performance or he would have to take action. This predictably caused Anna greater stress and anxiety.

Anna did not get any help until she was injured by her boyfriend, ended up in hospital, and was referred by the police to Shine. Shine is a national charity that works to make New Zealand homes violence-free. Shine's advocates support thousands of domestic abuse victims every year who ring our national Helpline or are referred to our advocacy services in Auckland.

Anna's advocate put in place a number of supports for her, and helped inform a police decision to remand her partner in custody.

With help from Shine, Anna eventually decided to relocate, which of course meant leaving her job, in order to get away from her dangerous boyfriend and start anew.

It's impossible to know for certain, but things could have turned out differently for Anna had her employer had a domestic violence policy. If her colleagues or boss had told Anna that they were worried about her and offered their support, they may have given her the courage to tell them more about what was happening to her. They may then have been able to keep her safe at work and give her the strength to leave her abusive boyfriend before the violence escalated and she ended up in hospital.

One in three Kiwi women are physically or sexually abused by a partner or ex-partner in their lifetime; one in twenty within the last year (Fanslow & Robinson, 2004). These statistics indicate that any medium- to large-size employer, especially with significant numbers of female staff, will have employees who are victims of domestic abuse. The abuse may affect their ability to concentrate, handle conflict, get on with co-workers, and of course come to work on time or at all.

Many women who are abused feel ashamed, often believe that they themselves are at least partly to blame for the abuse, and often feel that people will think less of them if they know about the abuse. There is undoubtedly a stigma for victims of domestic abuse, which makes it very difficult for them to come forward and tell people around them that they are being abused.

It is estimated that 96 percent of domestic abuse victims experience problems with their work. Statistics from www.dvinitiative.com show that for every 100 victims:

- 94 will take at least one extra sick day per year;
- 78 will be unable to concentrate and 23 will be unable to concentrate on a daily basis;
- 60 will be late by more than an hour at least five times per month;
- 60 will be harassed at work via the phone;
- 50 miss an average of three days per month;
- 30-44 will lose their jobs due to domestic violence.

Domestic abuse perpetrators' behaviour also has an impact on the workplace. One study found that over 75 percent of domestic violence perpetrators used workplace resources to express anger towards, check up on, pressure, or threaten their victim (NCADV website).

Domestic abuse has a ripple effect on the workplace. A 2005 survey in the US found 44 percent of respondents had personally experienced domestic violence's impact on the workplace, most frequently because a co-worker was a victim (NCADV website). Co-workers provide cover for the late, absent or less productive employee, spend work time trying to help or support their colleague—sometimes getting unsafely involved—and may feel helpless and distracted from their own work because they don't know what to do or say.

Most employers never find out about workers who are being abused by an intimate partner.

If they do find out, they often do not know how to respond, and have no agency policy to provide guidance. Hence, employees and their co-workers suffer, and so too does productivity.

Recently one of our advocates supported a woman named Nadia who worked as a waitress. Nadia got involved with a boyfriend who became increasingly abusive after they moved in together. He beat her up regularly, but left bruises where no one could see them.

Nadia rang our Helpline for support specifically because her boyfriend was harassing her at work and she was in danger of losing her job. He started by texting 20-30 times a night, and when, after a few days, she stopped responding to every text, he began ringing 15-20 times a night. Other co-workers had to pick up the slack every time she took a call. He occasionally came into the restaurant and sat at the bar keeping an eye on her, and once followed her into the kitchen to loudly accuse her of flirting with another employee. Her boss told her that she needed to get her partner under control or risk losing her job.

Nadia was too ashamed to tell her boss what was going on with her boyfriend at home, and she thought that he would not be supportive even if she told him. Although Shine was able to support Nadia in a number of ways, some months later she was fired.

Why EAP is not the answer

Over the years, Shine has assisted a number of employers to develop a workplace response to domestic abuse. Many of these employers initially believed that their employee assistance programme (EAP) was an adequate response, and did not feel it necessary to do anything further.

EAPs can be an excellent source of support for employees, but not all EAP providers understand how to recognise and address family violence. Perhaps more importantly, victims of abuse who are in danger usually do not want or need counselling, but rather require practical support to help them become safe.

Referring employees at risk of further abuse to an advocacy agency like Shine gives a victim access to specialist support and referrals. This may mean helping a victim and her children to access a safe house or refuge, or helping her to stay safely in her own home with a home security upgrade and/or personal alarm that links directly to police. Shine and other such agencies work with Police, Child Youth and Family, and other agencies to provide a coordinated response to achieve safety for victims and their children.

What employers can do

Employers can help staff access specialist support by making referral information easily accessible. Displaying Helpline cards in the women's bathrooms and posters around the office is a straightforward way to accomplish this. Shine can provide Helpline cards, and

posters and other workplace resources are available from: www.areyouok.org.nz/resources.

But this is not enough. Managers must have guidance from their employer about how to deal with an employee who is displaying signs of being abused or who has disclosed abuse. Without this, far too many managers will never ask and never offer support; and too many employees with valuable skills and experience will end up leaving or losing their jobs at a crisis point when they most need support.

Employers' domestic abuse policy should minimally state a purpose to support employees who are victims of domestic abuse, and outline what steps will be taken when abuse is disclosed. Such a policy might be incorporated into existing employee health and wellbeing policy, or policies on harassment and bullying. Employers are required by law to create a safe and secure working environment for employees and others coming into the workplace. A useful policy will set out practical steps for making a safer and more supportive work environment. More detail on developing a policy can be found at http://www.areyouok.org.nz/business_toolkit.php. Or you can get in touch with Shine for specific policy advice.

Victims of domestic abuse who struggle to concentrate at work are unlikely to sift through the employee policy manual to see if anything applies to their situation. It is important to let staff know about the policy through their induction, posters, the intranet, staff meetings, or whatever works best in your workplace.

For a policy to be truly effective, it is critical for HR staff and managers to undergo training to help them understand and implement the policy. Without training, it is unlikely that all or even

most managers will be motivated and able to detect signs of abuse and intervene safely and appropriately. Ideally, training should be provided by a specialist domestic abuse agency that has training expertise, in coordination with HR/management.

Recently, Shine supported a woman named Adrienne who had worked for a large organisation for many years. She had been physically and emotionally abused by her husband for 20 years. He worked in the same complex, in a different department. She finally had enough and decided to leave. She knew about her employer's domestic violence policy, so she talked to HR about her situation, knowing that she would be supported. HR referred her to the Shine Helpline, and immediately put in place a security plan. Her husband's boss also instructed him that if he entered her department, he would potentially face instant dismissal. With support from her employer and from Shine, Adrienne managed to leave her husband and stay safe.

Employers can make a huge difference in the lives of employees at a time of crisis if they have the right policy and supports in place. Employers may then benefit by retaining their most valuable asset—their staff—and by doing the right thing. **et**

For more information:

- National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (USA): www.ncadv.org
- www.2shine.org.nz
- www.areyouokay.org.nz

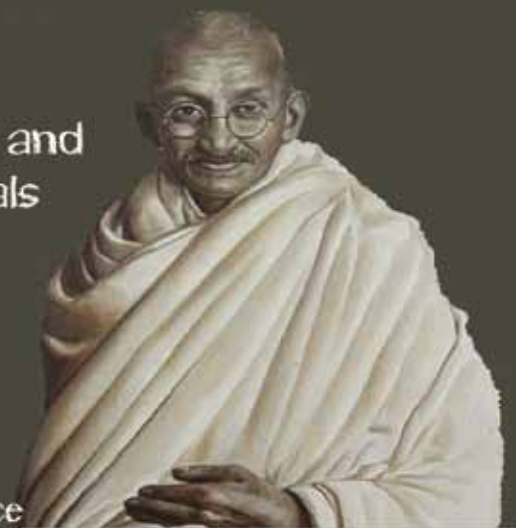
Holly Carrington is a policy analyst and spokesperson for Shine (Safer Homes in New Zealand Everyday).



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