

UK Employee Assistance Professionals Association

Factsheet | Domestic Violence and EAPs

1.0 Understanding domestic violence as a workplace issue

Domestic violence and abuse can take a number of forms and may be verbal, physical, emotional, sexual or financial. It is a massive health and wellbeing issue and its impact on employees and the workplace is often overlooked by managers and employers who have yet to make the connection between domestic abuse and an individual's behaviour or performance in the workplace.

For many victims of domestic violence, the workplace offers a shelter from the abuse and it is often here, through the support of line manager, colleagues and support services such as an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) that victims choose to take the first steps to safety.

The financial impact of domestic violence on the UK economy is estimated to be nearly £2 billion every year in lost economic output (Walby, 2009). This may take the form of decreased productivity, increased absence levels and high levels of employee turnover. It's worth noting, though, that this figure doesn't begin to take into account the human and emotional cost of domestic violence.

With one in four women estimated to experience domestic abuse at some point in their lifetime (CIPD, 2013) and with one third of domestic violence incidents happening in the workplace, it's clear that employers need to take action to support those affected directly and indirectly by this abuse.

In this Factsheet, the UK Employee Assistance Professionals Association takes a look at the role of EAPs specifically in supporting both employers and victims of domestic violence. We discuss the key factors to consider when creating a domestic violence policy and review how EAPs can help to support and address this issue. We also take an in-depth look at how one organisation has, with the full support of their EAP, helped their employees who are facing domestic violence.

A number of organisations and information sources on this topic are listed at the end of this factsheet; we encourage you to seek these out and refer to them as key resources on this issue.

2.0 Creating a domestic violence policy

It is important for employers to develop a policy to address domestic violence to provide a framework for their commitment and support for employees who are suffering from this type of abuse and detailing the action that the employer is prepared to take to assist. A policy will help to ensure a consistent and uniform approach to assisting employees who are victims of domestic violence and clearly demonstrates your commitment and care to your employees.

With a domestic violence policy in place, it's essential that organisations discuss their commitment and focus on this issue with their EAP provider. It's more than likely, if you're working with a UK EAPA Registered Provider, such discussion will happen as part of your account management and review.

However, it is vital to ensure that this discussion does take place and that your provider understands the commitment you're making to victims of abuse. It is not appropriate, for example, for an EAP to recommend relationship counselling where domestic abuse may be taking place, so be sure to have this conversation.

Whilst some of the key areas to be included in a domestic violence policy are referenced in this Factsheet, there are very many other resources available. The CIPD, for example, outlines the areas that you should reference and include if you are developing a policy for your organisation.

3.0 How EAPs can help organisations tackle domestic violence

An EAP provides free, confidential and around-the-clock advice on issues that affect employees in the workplace. This includes providing support to victims and survivors of domestic violence.

EAPs have a multi-functional role to play when it comes to helping manage, minimise and support the impact of domestic violence in the workplace. They can act as both an information resource and reference point to help raise awareness of the issue among those who may be victims, as well as supporting the managers and colleagues of those who may be affected by this abuse.

Naturally, EAPs also play a vital role supporting the victims of domestic violence by signposting information and advice, as well as enabling individuals to access counselling and other support services, such as personal safety planning.

EAPs are an invaluable resource for employers wishing to support those experiencing domestic violence, providing employer-funded expert help and support for employees while allowing them to keep as much separation as they wish from the workplace.

An EAP helpline provides a comprehensive first point of information, giving individuals practical and emotional support directly, as well as highlighting specialist external organisations that can help in specific ways.

Alongside this, an EAP's online support will include material that an employee can access confidentially to gently establish the support mechanisms open to them, even if they are not ready to speak to somebody about their situation. When they are, though, the anonymity of an EAP is often well placed to help some people to open up in greater comfort than a face-to-face environment would otherwise allow.

Of course, the support offered by EAPs is not limited to those who are directly affected by domestic violence.

Providers can also support those who may be supporting family, friends and colleagues with domestic violence issues, or who wish to offer support to somebody who they suspect may be being abused. Further, managers and colleagues who discover a domestic violence situation can be put in a difficult position about the way they respond, and the conflicting instincts of wanting to help whilst not invading an individual employee's privacy is a difficult balance to strike.

EAP providers' clinical teams are well experienced when it comes to supporting those who have had or who are planning difficult conversations about domestic violence and related issues. For example, a valuable element of the service EAPs offer is the ability to rehearse conversations with a senior counsellor, to explore possible or actual reactions to certain phrases, topics or ways of responding.

Whether for a colleague, friend or family member, addressing domestic violence and the impact it can have on an individual is a difficult line to tread. Therefore, it is important to be supportive without being invasive, or to assist without becoming too closely involved. EAPs can coach people through the process, giving practical advice – ranging from refuge details, contact information for charitable organisations and support programmes for children – as well as emotional support, and 'third party' support and mentoring.



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An employer can also use their EAP's expertise to offer awareness training, helping managers identify vulnerable individuals and risk behaviours, and ways in which managers can respond to provide appropriate support. This may help in devising training that they can deliver themselves, or by arranging training through an EAP's specialist consultants.

Ultimately, few employers would consider domestic violence an issue that they would want to ignore, and most would offer their employees help to address such issues taking place. Based on this, an EAP can be the cornerstone of an employer's strategy in giving people professional, confidential support and ensuring that the workplace is a safe and supportive place for those who may be suffering domestic abuse, in whatever form.

4.0 How Wragge & Co help staff facing domestic violence

When Wragge & Co, the commercial law firm, became aware of just how widespread the problem of domestic violence is across all sections of society, it set about encouraging any staff affected to come forward so it could provide appropriate support. Here, Lorna Gavin, head of corporate responsibility at the firm, explains the company's approach and the impact their work around this issue has had.

"We used to view domestic violence as a community issue, something that affected individuals at the refuges we were supporting and investing in as part of our work to reduce homelessness. It was only after we were introduced to CAADV, the Corporate Alliance Against Domestic Violence, that we realised just how widespread the problem is throughout society and therefore the extent to which it could be affecting our own workforce.

"One in four women and one in six men will be affected by domestic violence during their adult life. It is all too easy for employers to assume their own people aren't affected, but with statistics like that nearly every organisation will have employees living with domestic violence. With over 1000 staff ourselves, we had to face the fact that more than 200 of our employees would be affected at some point in their lives, with perhaps a few dozen enduring violence at any one time. We can't fix things at home directly, but we can get a proper policy and appropriate support in place to make anyone currently suffering feel safe about coming forward to ask for help.

"Research shows that over half of domestic violence sufferers call in sick at least three days a month, and turn up late more than five times a month. There's no doubt the issue impacts negatively on the bottom line, but for Wragge & Co, the humanitarian aspect was reason enough to take action. If you knew a friend was routinely enduring violence or abuse and you were in a position to help, how could you stand by and do nothing? We think of our employees as friends and wanted them to be able to ask for help.

"At the same time, we recognised there was a real risk that employees might feel too awkward or embarrassed to come forward. A key part of our strategy was therefore to encourage victims to call our existing Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), run by The Validium Group, so they could talk to a professional counsellor in confidence.

"We also joined CAADV and set about training HR and key managers how best to support staff affected by domestic violence, followed by receptionists and IT staff who were in a good position to deal with stalking and harassment.

"When it comes to domestic violence, a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, so as well as educating key staff how to spot the signs, ranging from performance and attendance issues to behaviour changes and physical signs of abuse, it was equally crucial that they didn't inadvertently endanger victims by telling them to leave their partner without proper safety planning. That required having a clear process in place to ensure all staff knew what to do if they thought or knew a colleague was at risk.



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“Once the training had been completed, we announced our decision to join CAADV via our senior partner’s weekly email and published a series of resource pages on the issue on our intranet. We also put up posters with bold headlines and striking images in every toilet cubicle, featuring real case studies about different types of domestic violence being endured by both men and women, and encouraging our own people to seek help from the firm. We attached business cards to the posters with the numbers people could call for help, including the Validium EAP.

“Since we launched the initiative in 2011, more than 80% of our workforce has accessed the domestic violence pages on our intranet. Although the identity of individuals is protected, we also know that 25–30 people are using the pages every month, spending a long time on the pages with useful links. Most important of all, victims have started to come forward and we have been able to give them practical support, for example, giving time out of work to do safety planning with the police – something they simply couldn’t do outside of work.

“People are still coming through so our focus now is to maintain the culture of trust. It has helped that we’ve had an EAP in place since 2008, as that shows we are already committed to helping people to address issues they face outside of work. Whether the abuse has been physical or emotional, the victims of domestic abuse have had their confidence battered. It’s a big brave thing to do to tell someone they need help, so it’s often easier for them to talk to Validium in confidence first.

“Domestic violence is the abuse of power over one person by another. We as employers can use our power to provide a safe environment for people to come forward and seek help. As our posters say, domestic violence can happen to anyone and help is closer than you think.”



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5.0 Further information and resources

CIPD (March 2013) Managing and supporting employees experiencing domestic abuse

Walby, S (2009) The cost of domestic violence: update 2009 (Lancaster University)

There are a number of organisations who can provide further advice and information on domestic violence and abuse, for example:

- Corporate Alliance Against Domestic Violence – www.caadv.org.uk
- Man Kind Initiative – www.mankind.org.uk
- Refuge – www.refuge.org.uk
- Women’s Aid – www.womensaid.org.uk

Please note that the UK Employee Assistance Professionals Association is the association for UK registered employee assistance programme providers and industry professionals. We are not able to provide individuals with information or advice relating to domestic violence or their company’s EAP.

Please refer to your company’s EAP or one of the organisations listed here for more information and support. The contact details for your company’s EAP should be listed on your intranet or available from your line manager or HR representative. ■