

Potential Violence in the Workplace - Indicators

What is workplace violence?

Most people think of violence as a physical assault. However, workplace violence is a much broader problem. It is any act in which a person is abused, threatened, intimidated or assaulted in his or her employment.

Rumors, swearing, verbal abuse, pranks, arguments, property damage, vandalism, sabotage, pushing, theft, physical assaults, psychological trauma, anger-related incidents, rape, arson and murder are all examples of workplace violence.

What should I remember most when learning about warning signs?

You must remember that it can be very difficult to know when a person is going to be violent. While not all people will show the following signs, these types of behaviors and physical signs can serve as warning signs that a situation could turn violent. Always take these behaviours "in context". Look for multiple warning signs and for signs of escalation (the behaviours are getting worse).

If you are concerned about a person who shows some or all of the identified characteristics, **take action**. Report your concern to your supervisor, or human resources department.

What are warning signs of a troubled person or employee?

Workplace violence can start as small incidents involving negative remarks and inappropriate behavior. It may escalate to physical or psychological violence.

It is much easier to prevent violence by stopping small incidents than trying to deal with the aftermath of a major crisis.

It is extremely important to understand that the following behaviors do not mean a person will become violent, but they may indicate that the person is experiencing high levels of stress. Each situation is unique and professional judgement or outside assistance may be necessary to determine if intervention is necessary.

Always take particular note if:

- There is a change in their behavior patterns.
- The frequency and intensity of the behaviours are disruptive to the work environment.
- The person is exhibiting many of these behaviors, rather than just a few.

Warning signs include:

- Crying, sulking or temper tantrums.
- Excessive absenteeism or lateness.
- Pushing the limits of acceptable conduct or disregarding the health and safety of others.
- Disrespect for authority.
- Increased mistakes or errors, or unsatisfactory work quality.
- Refusal to acknowledge job performance problems.
- Faulty decision making.
- Testing the limits to see what they can get away with.
- Swearing or emotional language.
- Handles criticism poorly.
- Making inappropriate statements.
- Forgetfulness, confusion and/or distraction.
- Inability to focus.
- Blaming others for mistakes.
- Complaints of unfair personal treatment.
- Talking about the same problems repeatedly without resolving them.
- Insistence that he or she is always right.
- Misinterpretation of communications from supervisors or co-workers.
- Social isolation.
- Personal hygiene is poor or ignored.
- Sudden and/or unpredictable change in energy level.
- Complaints of unusual and/or non-specific illnesses.
- Holds grudges, especially against his or her supervisor. Verbalizes hope that something negative will happen to the person against whom he or she has the grudge.

Are there physical signs that a person may be becoming violent?

Sometimes it is not what a person says, but what their body is "doing". Use caution if you see someone who shows one or more of the following "non-verbal" signs or body language.

- Flushed or pale face.
- Sweating.
- Pacing, restless, or repetitive movements.
- Signs of extreme fatigue (e.g., dark circles under the eyes).
- Trembling or shaking.
- Clenched jaws or fists.
- Exaggerated or violent gestures.
- Change in voice.
- Loud talking or chanting.
- Shallow, rapid breathing.
- Scowling, sneering or use of abusive language.
- Glaring or avoiding eye contact.
- Violating your personal space (they get too close).

What are other warning signs of a potentially violent person?

In some cases, there has been a clear pattern of warning signs before a violent incident. When you can, take note of:

History of violence

- Fascinated with incidents of workplace violence.
- Shows an extreme interest in, or obsession with, weapons.
- Demonstrated violence towards inanimate objects.
- Evidence of earlier violent behavior.

Threatening behavior

- States intention to hurt someone (can be verbal or written).
- Holds grudges.
- Excessive behavior (e.g. phone calls, gift giving).
- Escalating threats that appears well-planned.
- Preoccupation with violence.

Intimidating behavior

- Argumentative or uncooperative.
- Displays unwarranted anger.
- Impulsive or easily frustrated.
- Challenges peers and authority figures.

Increase in personal stress

- An unreciprocated romantic obsession.
- Serious family or financial problems.
- Recent job loss or personal loss.

Negative personality characteristics

- Suspicious of others.
- Believes he or she is entitled to something.
- Cannot take criticism.
- Feels victimized.
- Shows a lack of concern for the safety or well-being of others.
- Blames others for his problems or mistakes.
- Low self-esteem.

Marked changes in mood or behavior

- Extreme or bizarre behavior.
- Irrational beliefs and ideas.
- Appears depressed or expresses hopelessness or heightened anxiety.

- Marked decline in work performance.
- Demonstrates a drastic change in belief systems.

Socially isolated

- History of negative interpersonal relationships.
- Few family or friends.
- Sees the company as a "family".
- Has an obsessive involvement with his or her job.

Abuses drugs or alcohol

What can I do if I am concerned?

Take action.

If you are an employee, you can report your concerns to your supervisor, or human resources department. You can also get advice from your employee assistance program (EAP) if you have one. Find out if you have a violence prevention program in your workplace and what you should do -- if not, encourage your employer to develop one.

If you are an employer, you should know that many organizations are developing workplace violence prevention policies and programs. In fact, programs are required in many jurisdictions. A program is the best way to prevent workplace violence because it takes a very structured, well thought out approach to identifying hazards and reducing the risks for your organization. If your organization has a program, great! You should be fully aware of the policy and procedures developed to help keep your workplace safe. If you do not have a program, you should consider developing one. Remember, employers have a legal obligation to provide employees with a safe workplace. This obligation includes providing a workplace free from workplace violence.