

Work violence: no joke, take the initiative

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Part 3 of a three-part series on workplace violence.

To support a violence-free workplace, you should consider positive initiatives such as counselling and special leave, and communicate to staff that practical jokes that pose a violence risk are not acceptable.

Dr Kelly Watt, a Threat Assessment Specialist at ProActive ReSolutions Inc., based in Canada, recently participated in a Q&A session with *WorkplaceOHS* that dealt with these issues and more.

Dr Watt will be in Sydney and Melbourne next month (12 and 13 November, respectively) to present a series of workshops to help workers assess, manage and respond to a risk of violence in their workplaces.

Q

Can having counselling services address violence risk and its impacts?

A Having counselling services available for all employees (eg employee assistance programs) would be very helpful for those who are at risk of perpetrating violence and for those who have been victims or witnesses of violence.

Given that some of the most important risk factors for general violence (eg problems with employment relationships, serious mental disorder, substance use, and stress and coping) are those that respond well to intervention, it's best practice to support employees by intervening with these problems before they escalate to more serious problems.

If there are concerns about violence risk when a referral is being made, this should be communicated to the counsellor. You should also ensure the counsellor has adequate training related to violence risk assessment and management.

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Actual physical violence can be seen, but how do employers detect for violent ideation?

A Ideation detection can happen in multiple ways, some more direct than others. For instance, a worker could tell you they're having fantasies of hurting their co-workers or write in their journal or on Facebook about their violent thoughts — that's very explicit.

A worker might also engage in behaviour that could imply that they may be experiencing violent ideation. But you have to be clear, this is more of an inference. For example, if a worker posts pictures of restricted handguns in their workspace, it could be inferred they're potentially thinking of violence.

Sometimes when people are experiencing violent ideation they are having thoughts about what others may do to hurt them. When this thought becomes irrational it is referred to as paranoid ideation. For people with major mental illness this actually increases their risk of violence. They may become so fearful for their own safety that they do something to harm others as a way of defending themselves from perceived danger.

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In some cases, practical jokes and 'playing around' (eg play fighting) have led to a workplace injury. Should employers ban this behaviour?

A Part of how we define violence is any actual, attempted or threatened physical harm to others that was intentional or reckless and non-consensual. Therefore, you'll need to determine issues related to intent and consent in any investigation you do when someone was physically harmed by someone else.

When it comes to practical jokes and play fighting, employees may not intentionally physically harm their co-workers but could recklessly do so (eg when someone ought reasonably to have known the behaviour they engaged in could have resulted in physical harm to others). However, this would still be considered violence and therefore employees should be discouraged from engaging in any practical jokes that could recklessly result in physical harm to others.

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Is malicious property damage an example of a primary or a secondary warning sign?

A It will be a primary warning sign if it is perceived to be intentionally or recklessly done and perceived to give people reasonable grounds to fear for their physical safety.

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Is there a different approach for dealing with an employee who is a violent risk, compared with a non-employee who poses a risk?

A The approach you take in dealing with violence risk from employees and customers should not differ with respect to detecting warning signs and responding to warning signs (eg violence triaging — see [Part 1](#) of this series). Regardless of whether it is a customer or employee, employers have the responsibility to triage for and respond to obvious signs of violence risk under statutory law, common law and professional codes of ethics. Failure to do so may result in legal liability if actions failed to meet professional standards and resulted in harm to others.

However, if you have reasonable grounds to be concerned about violence risk, your options related to conducting comprehensive violence risk assessment and management will be very different depending on the case.

Example

If you're concerned about the violence risk a customer poses, you may not know the identity of the customer, may not have the ability to interview this person, and may not have the same options related to management. If you're concerned about violence risk posed by an employee, you often know the employee well, will have the opportunity to interview them, and will have many options related to management.

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There has been a big push by Australian unions for special leave in employment clauses to deal with domestic/family violence; and, many employers are on board, too. How important are initiatives like this for a positive workplace culture?

A This initiative is extremely progressive. Importantly, it demonstrates not only that domestic violence is not acceptable in the workplace, but also that workplaces are there to support workers, whether the problems they are experiencing are occurring inside or outside the workplace.

Domestic violence is not a private issue because there's a possibility it could spilled over into the workplace. An employer should want to do whatever they could to support the person, which also helps manage the risk. It's something that we all have a responsibility to try and prevent.

Part 1 of this series covered key risk factors for violence, as well as the strategies you should implement to tackle the risk of violence at your workplace. **Part 2**, a Q&A with Dr Watt, addressed critical issues often overlooked, such as scenarios that demand police intervention and the potential spill-over of domestic violence into the workplace.

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James Harkness is a staff writer for WorkplaceOHS and Workplace Info, whose role includes producing case write-ups, news stories, and analysis pieces. He has also produced copy and performed editorial tasks for a handful of business chambers operating in Inner City Sydney. [more from James](#)

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