

Violence in the Workplace – Warning Signs

Government of Canada, Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (www.ccohs.ca)

1 Warning Signs - What to Remember

Workplace violence is a much broader problem than physical assault. It is any act in which a person is abused, threatened, intimidated or assaulted in his or her employment

It can be very difficult to know when a person is going to be violent. Not all people will show the warning signs, but these behaviors and physical signs can serve as warnings that a situation could turn violent. Always take behaviors “in context” and look for multiple signs, particularly for signs of escalation.

If you are concerned about someone, **take action. Report concern to:**

- **Supervisor**
- **Human Resources**
- **Any Person Who is Able to Take Corrective Action (authority)**

Note: It is much easier to prevent violence by stopping small incidents than trying to deal with the aftermath of a major crisis. Behaviors identified here may only indicate a person is experiencing high levels of stress. Intervention and resources at this juncture may prevent violent act(s) in the future.

Always Take Particular Note If

- There is a change in behavior patterns (not normal for that individual)
- The frequency and intensity of the behaviors are disruptive to the work environment
- The person is exhibiting many of these behaviors, rather than just a few (totality of circumstances)

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 something negative will happen to the person grudge is against

Physical Signs Include

- 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 uncomfortably close)

2 Other Warning Signs

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

History of Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Argumentative or uncooperative• Displays unwarranted anger• Impulsive or easily frustrated• Challenges peers and authority figures
Increase in Personal Stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• An unreciprocated romantic obsession• Serious family or financial problems• Recent job loss or personal loss
Negative Personality Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 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 and/or alcohol**

3 What To Do If You Are Concerned

TAKE ACTION

If You Are an Employee

Report your concerns to your supervisor or human resources department. If you have an Employee Assistance Program, you can seek them out for advice and direction. Find out if your place of employment has a violence prevention program and what you should do. Encourage your employer to adopt/develop one if not.

If You Are an Employer

Many organizations are developing workplace violence prevention policies and programs, or they already have working program. Some are also taking advantage of training offered by law enforcement or other qualified organizations. 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. Remember, employers have an obligation to provide employees with a safe workplace.

