

Violence and Harassment in the Workplace

Violence and Harassment in the Workplace - Warning Signs

On this page

[What is workplace violence and harassment?](#)

[Are there physical signs that a person may act out?](#)

[What should I remember most when learning about warning signs?](#)

[What are other warning signs?](#)

[What are signs that a worker may need support?](#)

[What can I do if I am concerned?](#)

What is workplace violence and harassment?

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

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

NOTE: In this document, we use the term violence to also include bullying and harassment

Please refer to the following OSH Answers documents for information:

- [Bullying in the Workplace](#)
- [Internet Harassment or Cyberbullying](#)
- [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace](#)
- [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Family \(Domestic\) Violence](#)
- [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Legislation](#)
- [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Dealing with Negative Interactions](#)
- [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Parking Lot Safety](#)

- [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Warning Signs](#)
 - [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Working Late](#)
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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 behaviours 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 the person designated in your organization's violence prevention program, your supervisor, or the human resources department.

What are signs that a worker may need support?

Some behaviours may indicate a worker is struggling. While these behaviours do not necessarily mean a person will become violent, they may indicate that the worker is experiencing periods of high stress and needs support from the workplace.

While not all people will show the following signs, these types of behaviours and physical signs can serve as warning signs. Always take these behaviours "in context". Is it a bad day or a pattern of behaviour? Look for multiple warning signs and for signs of escalation (the behaviours are getting worse).

Each situation is unique and professional judgment or outside assistance may be necessary to determine if intervention is necessary.

Always take particular note if:

- There is a change in the worker's behaviour patterns.
- The frequency and intensity of the behaviours are disruptive to the work environment.
- The worker is exhibiting many of these behaviours, 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 limits to see what they can get away with.
- Swearing or emotional language.
- Handling criticism poorly.
- Making inappropriate statements.
- Forgetfulness, confusion, or distraction.
- Inability to focus.
- Blaming others for mistakes.
- Complaints of unfair personal treatment.
- Talking about the same problems repeatedly without resolving them.
- The insistence that they are always right.
- Misinterpreting communications from supervisors or co-workers.
- Social isolation.
- Sudden and/or unpredictable change in energy level.
- Complaints of unusual or non-specific illnesses.
- Holding grudges, and verbalizing hope that something negative will happen to the person against whom they have the grudge.

Are there physical signs that a person may act out?

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).
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What are other warning signs?

Generally speaking, learning about patterns and warning signs could help workplaces prevent potential incidents of violence. No one can predict human behaviour, and there is no specific profile of a potentially violent person.

Nevertheless, a potentially violent person may exhibit any or all of the following characteristics:

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 violent behaviour in the past.

Threatening behaviour

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

Intimidating behaviour

- 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 they are entitled to something.
- Cannot take criticism.
- Feels victimized.
- Shows a lack of concern for the safety or well-being of others.
- Blames others for their problems or mistakes.
- Low self-esteem.

Marked changes in mood or behaviour

- Extreme or bizarre behaviour.
- 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.
- Has an obsessive involvement with their job.

Abuses substances, such as drugs or alcohol

What can I do if I am concerned?

Take action, especially if you feel your safety or the safety of others is threatened.

Follow your workplace's policy and procedures for responding to violence and harassment, including reporting by witnesses.

If you are a worker, you can also report your concerns to your supervisor, human resources department, or the person designated by your organization's violence prevention program. You can also get advice from your [employee assistance program](#) (EAP) if available.

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