

# Personal Relationship Violence in the Workplace:

A handbook  
for the  
workplace



First Edition

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## Preface

The Ontario Safety Association for Community and Healthcare (OSACH) supports the prevention and reduction of workplace injuries and occupational diseases in Ontario's health care sector by assisting organizations to adopt preventive best practices and approaches. The purpose of this booklet is to raise awareness of the prevalence and effects of personal relationship violence in the workplace, and to provide the employer, supervisor, co-workers and victims with suggestions to prevent and/or minimize any negative effects.

OSACH is a non-profit organization designated as the Safe Workplace Association for the health care sector under the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997. Our vision is to lead Ontario's community and health care workplaces to be the healthiest and safest through innovative solutions.

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## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Recognizing PRV .....	2
The Effects of Personal Relationship Violence .....	4
Including PRV as part of a workplace violence prevention program.....	5
Disclosure .....	9
Workplace PRV Education Program.....	11
Putting this knowledge to work.....	12
Conclusion.....	14
Resources Available for Victims of Personal Relationship Violence .....	14
Glossary of Terms .....	16
References .....	16

# Personal Relationship Violence in the Workplace: A handbook for the workplace

## Introduction

Violence in the workplace is a growing issue in the health and community care sector. The literature recognizes four types of workplace violence:

- **Type I (Criminal Intent):** The perpetrator has no relationship to the worker or workplace
- **Type II (Client or Customer):** The perpetrator is a client at the workplace who becomes violent toward a worker or another client
- **Type III (Worker-to-worker):** The perpetrator is an employee or past employee of the workplace
- **Type IV (Personal Relationship):** The perpetrator has a personal relationship with an employee or a client, e.g., domestic violence in the workplace

Often, employers do not recognize Type IV, Personal Relationship Violence (PRV) as a workplace hazard. Employers and workers alike often believe that PRV is a personal issue and that there is nothing workplace parties can do about it. But this belief makes it even harder for a victim to ask for help (Government of Manitoba 2008).

### Personal Relationship Violence (PRV)

The perpetrator has a personal relationship with the victim and employs a pattern of coercive tactics meant to hurt or intimidate the victim through the use of physical force, verbal harassment or manipulation (financial or emotional) in order to establish and maintain power and control over the victim.

Adapted from Government of Manitoba 2008

#### **Note:**

- The perpetrator is not necessarily a current or former spouse or partner, but may be a relative or friend
- The perpetrator is not necessarily male – five to 10 per cent are women (Zachary 2000).

PRV is workplace violence as soon as it enters the workplace, and there are many actions that the employer, supervisor and co-workers can take to prevent PRV from entering the workplace, and to minimize any negative effects.

PRV is on the rise in Canada, and is noted as the “fastest growing type of workplace violence in Canada” (ACWS 2008, p.1). PRV can enter the workplace and potentially threaten the safety of not only the employed victim but his or her co-workers, supervisors and clients as well. The effects of PRV range from workplace interference experienced by all employees to significant organizational costs.

This booklet provides practical suggestions that all workplace parties can adopt to raise awareness of PRV in the workplace and reduce workplace risk. It outlines:

- The effects of PRV in the workplace on the organization and workers
- Recognizing the signs and symptoms of PRV
  - Roles of the employer, supervisor and employees in supporting victims of PRV and preventing related workplace violence
  - Practical suggestions for including PRV in the organization’s workplace violence prevention program

**Personal Relationship Violence may also be known as Domestic Violence, Intimate Partner Violence, Woman Abuse, or Family Violence.**

## Recognizing PRV

Some victims may not realize that the actions they are enduring constitute PRV. The same may apply to co-workers witnessing the behaviours or hearing victim’s confidences. Perhaps this is because 66 per cent of violent workplace incidents are committed by someone the victim knows (OWJN 2008). The following behaviours and actions have been identified as interference actions used by the perpetrator to interfere with the victim’s work:

- Attempts to prevent the victim from getting to work or looking for work, such as:
  - Interfering with transportation by hiding or stealing the victim’s car keys or transportation money

- Failing to show up to care for children
- Physically restraining the victim
- Interfering with the victim while at work by:
  - Placing repeated phone calls to the victim while she is at work
  - Stalking and/or watching the victim while she is at work
  - Showing up at the workplace and pestering co-workers with questions about the victim (where is she, who she's with, when will she be back, etc.)
  - Lying to co-workers (she's sick today, she's out of town, she's home with a sick child, etc.)
  - Threatening co-workers (if you don't tell me, I'll ...)
  - Verbally abusing the victim or co-workers
  - Displaying jealous and controlling behaviours
  - Destroying the victim's or organization's property
  - Kidnapping the victim
  - Physically harming the victim and/or co-workers

**The most common tactics are:**

- Repeated harassing phone calls
- Harassing in person at the workplace

(Swanberg, Macke & Logan 2006)

(Swanberg, Macke & Logan 2006; Swanberg, Macke & Logan 2007; Zachary 2000)

- The victim may:
  - Have bruising that cannot be explained
  - Be sad, lonely, withdrawn and afraid
  - Have trouble concentrating on a task
  - Apologize for the perpetrator's behaviour
  - Be nervous talking when the perpetrator is there
  - Make last minute excuses/cancellations
  - Use drugs or alcohol to cope

## The Effects of Personal Relationship Violence

The victim, co-workers, supervisors and the employer are all subject to the effects of PRV once it enters the workplace.

For the **victim**, PRV has a profound effect on employment security in that she may:

**54 per cent of domestic violence victims miss three or more days of work a month. (Zachary 2000)**

- Be unable to concentrate
- Leave work to go home sick
- Become dependent on medications or alcohol in order to cope
- Be unable to go to work because of interference techniques, or because she calls in sick to hide the results of physical beatings, or is too upset to go to work (Swanberg & Macke 2006).

The resulting increased absenteeism and/or decreased productivity may be interpreted by a supervisor or employer as a lack of employee responsibility, or the employee neglecting her job duties.

**The social costs, including health care for victims, criminal justice, social services and lost productivity, are estimated in the billions of dollars; the psychological impacts for victims, their family and friends cannot be measured by dollars.**

**(Statistics Canada 2006)**

**Co-workers and supervisors** may also feel the effect, either by witnessing harmful behaviour towards the victim, or by being threatened themselves. While defending the victim, a co-worker might end up caught in the middle. Consider also that a distracted worker, who is not focused on the task at hand, may create a safety hazard in the workplace and increase the risk of injury to workers or to clients.

For the **organization**, increased absenteeism, sick time and decreased productivity obviously translate into significant costs (Riger, Raja & Camacho 2002; Swanberg & Macke 2006). As well, organizations face recruitment and replacement costs if victims quit their job because of PRV or are dismissed by the employer because of their reduced work productivity.

Even **clients and visitors** can feel the effect if they witness a PRV incident in the workplace, whether threatening behaviour, property destruction, physical attack or kidnapping of the victim. Such experiences could cause both physical and psychological health implications.

## Including PRV as part of a workplace violence prevention program

It is well established in the literature that perpetrators of PRV choose the victim’s workplace as a means to access the victim because often this is a factor in the victim’s life that remains unchanged and predictable. Even if a victim has changed residences to isolate herself from the perpetrator, she may still experience the negative actions at work. Zachary (2000) reported 74 per cent of PRV victims are harassed while at work, which puts themselves and all people present at the workplace at risk.

Considering the statistics, prudent employers will establish a preventive plan of action to minimize the chance of PRV entering the workplace. The health, safety, security and well-being of all people should be addressed at all workplaces, and the employer has a responsibility under the Ontario Occupational Health and Safety Act to “take all precautions reasonable for the protection of a worker” (OHS Act section 25(2)(h)). This includes having a plan in place to minimize the impact of PRV when it enters the workplace.

Some organizations choose to include PRV within the violence prevention policy, while others may develop a separate policy. The choice depends on the organization, but a zero-tolerance stance should be adopted for any type of violent behaviour, including PRV.

**In Canada, almost 20 per cent of all incidents of violent victimization, including physical assaults, sexual assault and robbery, occurred while the victim was at work.**  
(Statistics Canada 2004)

**Less than 50 per cent of Canadian workplaces have policies to manage this risk.**  
(ACWS 2008)

*The prevention program should include:*

### Prevention policies, procedures and activities:

- A statement that there is zero tolerance of PRV in the workplace and on the property
- Confidential reporting methods for PRV situations
- Supervisor and employee training providing education about PRV and resources available

- Policies to include paid time off, extended leave of absence, workplace relocation
- What to do if PRV is discovered

**Protection measures:**

- Clear and simple steps to be taken by manager, supervisors, security personnel and co-workers if PRV enters into the workplace

**Assistance to the victim and co-workers:**

- Lists of internal and community resources to assist the victim, perpetrator and witnesses

(Swanberg, Logan & Macke 2005)

## Employer Actions

The employer can pre-plan for possible PRV events and establish basic precautions such as:

- Developing a guide for the workplace that includes strategies for dealing with the perpetrator if he or she appears at the workplace
- Establishing specific actions that should be taken by the employer or supervisor when PRV enters the workplace
- Outlining potential case-specific actions that may be offered to the victim, such as flexibility in work hours or workload, security escorts to vehicles, extended leave periods, etc.
- Developing a security plan for the workplace, including when doors should be locked, pre-programming telephones with emergency contact numbers, installing desk or wall panic buttons, and implementing the use of code words or phrases to indicate a potential situation, etc.

**Thirty-eight per cent of Canadian nurses experience PRV.**

(Anderson 2002)

- Developing a list of resources for victims, and making copies easily accessible in staff rooms, washrooms or on the organization's computer system
- Emphasizing that confidentiality will be maintained, that victims of PRV will be supported and that employment will continue for the victim
- Offering an employee assistance program (EAP) for PRV situations, and ensuring the victim is aware if it also offers support to the perpetrator
- Establishing a company hotline for employees to report threatening situations (that they have either experienced or witnessed)
- Providing management training programs pertaining to work/family issues

(Anderson 2002; Rothman et al. 2007; Swanberg, Logan & Macke 2005; Swanberg, Macke & Logan 2006; Swanberg, Macke & Logan 2007)

## Supervisor Actions

The supervisor can educate workers about the workplace violence prevention procedures and resources that the employer has established, and has greater influence over case-specific support strategies.

Basic precautions and pre-planning activities by the supervisor should include:

- Providing education to all employees about the assistance available from the employer
- Appearing approachable to the victim or co-workers so that they are encouraged to report
- Providing specific training to security staff about PRV
- Having information available with respect to legal, counselling and safety planning resources

- Distributing brochures about implications of PRV in the workplace
- Posting a PRV resource list in the workplace in an accessible and visible location
- Checking the work site to ensure the premises are secure
- Enforcing the zero-tolerance policy towards violence, including PRV
- Conducting periodic workplace checks to ensure all security requirements are in place and operating

(Anderson 2002; Rothman et al. 2007; Zachary 2000)

Case-specific strategies the supervisor should consider if an employee discloses the potential for PRV at work include:

- Encouraging the victim to develop a personal safety plan while at home, conducting personal business or en route to work
- Encouraging the victim to save threatening voicemails or emails in case future legal action needs to be taken
- Allowing the victim to have priority parking near the building
- Screening calls by routing them through main reception or security
- Relocating the victim's work area to a secured area
- Providing a photo or physical description of the perpetrator to reception areas and/or security
- Providing escorts to walk the victim to and from a vehicle or public transportation
- Advising and/or assist victims to seek police assistance and/or file charges

## Co-worker Actions

Once co-workers are trained to recognize the signs of PRV, they are able to offer appropriate supports, such as:

- Spending break time with the victim
- Providing a listening ear; believing what the victim is saying; letting the victim know that any information shared will not be repeated
- Not blaming the victim or the perpetrator and not telling the victim what to do
- Providing a list of available resources and encouraging the victim to seek professional help
- Offering to screen phone calls or emails from the perpetrator

(Swanberg, Macke & Logan 2006; Swanberg, Macke & Logan 2007)

**Victims are more likely to confide in a co-worker than a supervisor, trained human resources person or security.**

**(Swanberg & Macke 2006)**

## Disclosure

A plan to prevent PRV from entering the workplace is more successful if the employer is well informed of all the risk factors. Open disclosure decreases the risk for all people at the workplace since the most effective prevention strategies can be put in place if the employer is aware of the actual threat of PRV.

Unfortunately, due to the stigma associated with PRV, many victims are not willing to disclose the facts. The chart on the next page provides some of the reasons why a victim may or may not choose to disclose. Employers and supervisors should attempt to address the reasons for not disclosing as this will increase victim confidence in workplace supports and increase the disclosure rate at the organization (Swanberg & Macke 2006).

Why victims might choose not to disclose:	Why victims might choose to disclose:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't trust the employer</li> <li>• Fear of losing her job</li> <li>• Invasion of privacy</li> <li>• Perceived as a personal or private matter</li> <li>• Fear of being humiliated by the perpetrator</li> <li>• Too ashamed to speak about it</li> <li>• Co-worker/supervisor might be friends with the perpetrator</li> <li>• Fear of being held responsible for the PRV</li> <li>• Fear that the perpetrator will be harmed</li> <li>• Fear that perpetrator will seek revenge</li> <li>• Belief that the employer does not care or have time for PRV problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has a sympathetic supervisor or co-workers who are willing to listen and feels safe in the work environment</li> <li>• Needs someone to confide in and talk to</li> <li>• Wants to explain decreased work performance, increased absences or tardiness so she won't lose her job</li> <li>• Needs time off from work for court appearances</li> <li>• Wants to confirm supervisor or co-worker suspicions</li> <li>• Wants to explain why she called in sick or appeared upset at work, or physical injuries and bruises</li> <li>• Wants to explain past/future phone calls or visits from the perpetrator</li> <li>• Wants to warn the workplace that the perpetrator may show up at work</li> <li>• Is afraid for her safety</li> </ul>

(Paluzzi & Houde-Quimby 1996; Swanberg, Logan & Macke 2005; Swanberg, Macke & Logan 2006; Swanberg, Macke & Logan 2007)

Once a victim discloses, she can offer the following information to support the PRV prevention plan:

- Sharing ideas with the employer/supervisor on any changes that can be made to increase safety for everyone
- Identifying an emergency contact person if the employer is unable to contact the victim
- Ensuring the employer is aware of court orders such as custody orders, peace bonds, and restraining orders

- Providing a photo or physical description of the perpetrator
- Contacting professionals for assistance in developing a personal safety plan for non-work times (see resource section)

## Workplace PRV Education Program

An education program at the workplace should provide general information on PRV with the goal of:

- Increasing awareness of the implications PRV has for workplace health and safety
- Increasing disclosure rates
- Ensuring victim disclosure results in appropriate responses by the employer, supervisor and co-workers

The program should be structured to include the following information for the supervisor and front-line workers as appropriate:

- Prevalence of PRV in society
- Signs, symptoms and consequences of PRV in the workplace, including the characteristics exhibited by a victim and common perpetrator tactics
- Organizational procedures for handling PRV incidents, including specific actions available in the organization when PRV enters the workplace and the importance of maintaining employee confidentiality
- Correct responses following victim disclosure
- Workplace policies and practices that are available to accommodate victim's needs (leaves of absences, flexible work hours)
- Organizational resources such as the Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
- Community resources available to help employees (consider posting in the washrooms, perhaps on a tear-off pad)

(Swanberg, Logan & Macke 2005; Swanberg, Macke & Logan 2007; Zachary 2000)

## Putting this knowledge to work

The following case study provides an example of how the employer, supervisor and fellow workers might respond to this PRV situation.

Jane has worked as a registered practical nurse in a hospital for five years. Over the past six months co-workers have seen a pattern in Jane's behaviour involving increased tardiness, increased absenteeism and distraction when providing care to her patients. The administration staff states that Jane's husband calls several times during her shift demanding to speak with her immediately each time. It has been noticed that Jane always seems to be disturbed after her husband calls and often excuses herself to a private area. Jane's co-workers have noticed that she seems to be emotionally distraught during her shifts. She is always willing to pick up extra shifts or offer to work overtime. Jane's supervisor suspects her actions indicate that she is frightened to go home to her husband, but this is just speculation since Jane has not disclosed her situation to anyone at work.

The table below outlines possible actions the employer, supervisor or co-workers can take with and without Jane's disclosure.

<i>Without Jane's disclosure</i>	<i>With Jane's disclosure</i>
<p><b>Co-worker Response:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spend time with Jane during breaks or on lunch and offer a listening ear.</li> <li>• Offer to meet Jane for coffee outside of the work environment in the event she does not feel comfortable disclosing at work</li> </ul>	<p><b>Co-worker Response:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Become familiar with what Jane's husband looks like and sounds like in case he appears at work so that security can be notified.</li> <li>• Offer to screen Jane's calls from her husband.</li> <li>• Provide Jane with a list of places to go for help.</li> </ul>

<i>Without Jane’s disclosure</i>	<i>With Jane’s disclosure</i>
<p><b>Supervisor Response:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote privacy for all workers, especially Jane, and enforce consequences for breach of confidentiality.</li> <li>• Have information available with respect to legal, counselling and other resources that workers can access for help.</li> <li>• Review the availability of the Employee Assistance Program with all workers.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Supervisor Response:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer a listening ear if Jane chooses to disclose.</li> <li>• Be approachable and assure Jane that her employment is not in jeopardy.</li> <li>• Provide training to security staff in case Jane’s husband appears at work.</li> <li>• Advise administration staff to screen Jane’s phones calls and have a recent photograph of her husband posted (with Jane’s approval) and staff notified.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Employer Response:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer an employee assistance program for all workers and their family members.</li> <li>• Develop, enforce and evaluate a violence prevention program that includes PRV.</li> <li>• Offer training programs for all staff to increase awareness of PRV and outline organizational processes and supports.</li> <li>• Enforce confidentiality policies for all staff.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Employer response:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer a listening ear if Jane chooses to disclose.</li> <li>• Allow schedule and workload flexibility should Jane require time off to deal with the situation with her husband.</li> <li>• Develop, enforce and evaluate a safety plan for the workplace specific to this case.</li> <li>• Provide a security escort program for Jane when entering and exiting the building.</li> <li>• Have the premises and parking lot secured.</li> <li>• Install panic buttons on the floor where Jane works.</li> </ul>

## Conclusion

Knowing the prevalence of personal relationship violence in Canadian workplaces and the costs to the victim, co-workers and the organization, it is necessary to include PRV in a workplace violence prevention plan. The suggestions outlined in this booklet should assist the organization in establishing prevention procedures, building a resource list and developing an education program to raise awareness of PRV in the workplace. While every organization is different, being prepared and having an idea of what your organization can do will minimize the impact of PRV in the workplace.

## Resources Available for Victims of Personal Relationship Violence

Assaulted Women's Hotline: 1-866-863-0511 (toll-free)

Centre for Research & Education on Violence against Women and Children (UWO): [www.crvawc.ca/](http://www.crvawc.ca/)

Child Care Centres: Ministry of Child & Youth Services:  
[www.gov.on.ca/children](http://www.gov.on.ca/children)

Children's Aid Societies: Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies:  
[www.oacas.org/childwelfare/locate.htm](http://www.oacas.org/childwelfare/locate.htm)

Co-operative Housing: Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada:  
1-800-268-2537

Femaide crisis line for women who are victims of violence: 1-877-fem-aide  
or 1-877-336-2433 (toll-free)

Food Banks: Canadian Association of Food Banks: [foodbankscanada.ca](http://foodbankscanada.ca)

Lawyer Referral Service for the Law Society of Upper Canada Telephone:  
1-800-268-8326 [www.lsuc.on.ca](http://www.lsuc.on.ca)

Legal Aid Ontario Telephone: 1-800-668-8258 or 416-979-1446,  
[www.legalaid.on.ca/](http://www.legalaid.on.ca/)

Neighbours Friends and Families, [www.neighbourfriendsandfamilies.ca/](http://www.neighbourfriendsandfamilies.ca/)

Ontario Human Rights Commission: 416-326-9511 Toll-free:  
1-800-387-9080

Ontario Women's Directorate: [www.citizenship.gov.on.ca/owd/english/](http://www.citizenship.gov.on.ca/owd/english/)

Ontario Women's Justice Network (for restraining orders, peace bonds,  
and terms of release): [www.owjn.org/info/orders.htm](http://www.owjn.org/info/orders.htm)

Safety for Pets: [www.ovma.org/pet\\_owners/safepet.html](http://www.ovma.org/pet_owners/safepet.html)

Sexual Assault/Rape Crisis Centres

Canadian Association of Sexual Assault Centres: [www.casac.ca](http://www.casac.ca)

Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres: [www.occcc.ca](http://www.occcc.ca)

Ontario Network of Sexual Assault/Domestic Violence Treatment Centres:  
[www.satcontario.com](http://www.satcontario.com)

Social Assistance: Ministry of Community and Social Services:  
[www.mcsc.gov.on.ca](http://www.mcsc.gov.on.ca)

Supervised Access Centres: Ministry of the Attorney General  
[www.attorneygeneral.jus.gov.on.ca](http://www.attorneygeneral.jus.gov.on.ca)

SupportLink for potential victims of violence in Ontario: 416-314-2447,  
Toll-free: 1-888-579-2888

Her Own Way: A women's guide to safe and successful travel:  
[www.journeywoman.com/travel101/herownway.html](http://www.journeywoman.com/travel101/herownway.html)

Tenants' Rights: Community Legal Education Ontario  
[www.cleo.on.ca/english/pub/onpub/subject/landlord.htm](http://www.cleo.on.ca/english/pub/onpub/subject/landlord.htm)

Women's Shelters: [www.shelternet.ca](http://www.shelternet.ca) (maps of shelters in Canada)

## Glossary of Terms

ACWS – Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters

EAP – Employee Assistance Program

IPV – Intimate Partner Violence

OHSA – Occupational Health and Safety Act

OWJN – Ontario Women’s Justice Network

Perpetrator – the person committing the act of personal relationship violence

PRV – Personal Relationship Violence (for definition see page 1)

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