Employers urged to help survivors of domestic abuse

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Employment Law News

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This week marks sexual abuse and sexual violence awareness week. Most employers are aware of their obligations to prevent abuse and violence in the workplace, but with lines blurring between the home and the office should employers support those suffering at home?

During the first lockdown period, there was a significant surge in victims seeking support for domestic abuse. Refuge recorded an 80% increase in calls in March alone. This trend has continued over the last 12 months.

The nature of lockdown (and we are now on national lockdown number three) has meant that victims of domestic abuse have become even more isolated. The loss of connections to the outside world has made them more vulnerable and allowed perpetrators even more control over their lives. The most horrifying fallout of the national lockdowns is that it has prevented victims from any respite from their abuse – trapped in their own homes – a supposedly safe space for so many of us. Most notably, there have been more reports of abusers' control over their victims' IT devices, making it even more difficult for those in need of help to seek help.

On 14 January 2021, Business Minster Paul Scully MP sent an open letter to all employers urging them (us) to consider what can be done to help survivors of domestic abuse.

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/domestic-abuse-open-letter-to-employers-on-how-to-help-workers-find-the-right-support/domestic-abuse-open-letter-from-the-business-minister-to-employers

The open letter rightly points out that domestic abuse is still a taboo subject and few employers have any coherent workplace policy or support framework to deal with the possibility that its workers could be victims of domestic abuse. Given the strides forward so far as mental health at work is concerned, why shouldn't the same apply in relation to domestic abuse?

At present, the only social contact many victims have is with colleagues (albeit virtually). Employers are therefore in a unique position to identify changes in their employees' conduct which could indicate abuse. For example, if an

employee is suddenly more withdrawn, overly critical of themselves and their work, there is an unexpected dip in their performance or references being made to their partner's (or other family member's) controlling behaviour. These cues may be subtle to begin with, but over time they may build to reveal the reality of incredibly difficult personal circumstances.

But what can an employer do if it suspects that an employee is suffering abuse?

Firstly, acknowledge that domestic abuse can take many different forms including: coercive control, economic abuse, online or digital abuse, harassment and stalking, psychological and sexual abuse.

The open letter refers to the following initiatives an employer could implement in order to help those who may need help:

1. **Respond appropriately** – listen, try to understand and take care not to place blame on the victim. Acknowledge how brave it is to talk about domestic abuse.
2. **Raise awareness** – is there a policy in place offering useful guidance and information on how to access support? Has training been offered to help staff spot the signs and what to do if they suspect a colleague is being subjected to domestic abuse? Is there a clear message that all staff should feel comfortable raising these issues and in doing so that they will be supported? A poster/email or information on the intranet with details of support groups is a great start. Small things can make a big difference.
3. **Pragmatic ways to help** – it's not always about offering a shoulder to cry on, there are practical ways to help too. For example, offer to pay an employee's salary into a separate bank account, put in place flexible working

arrangements or provide a private space for employees to make calls or other administrative tasks they may not be able to freely do at home.

4. **There is lots of free support available – use it!** Please see the links at the end of this article which signpost useful toolkits on how employers and employees can help those suffering from domestic abuse.

5. **Involve experts** – domestic abuse is a sensitive and complex issue. No one expects an employer to become an expert overnight. If an employer finds itself in a difficult situation concerning an employee and domestic abuse, it should seek external help. The type of external support will depend on the situation and also whether or not an employer has the victim's permission to do so.

6. **Critically** – household isolation instructions as a result of coronavirus do not apply if you need to leave your home to escape domestic abuse However, make sure to get professional advice before advising on this specific point.

Dealing with the possibility that an employee may be the subject of domestic abuse is a terrifying prospect and most employers would be fearful of getting it wrong. The primary way to begin tackling this deeply complex and frightening situation is by raising awareness, offering an open and trustworthy environment for victims and identifying a need for support.

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Further support can be found here:

Helplines/Websites

https://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk/

The freephone, 24-hour National Domestic Abuse Helpline 0808 2000 247

https://www.solacewomensaid.org/contact-us

Men's Advice Line – confidential helpline, email and webchat service for male victims of domestic abuse.

Call 0808 8010327 or visit **mensadviceline.org.uk**

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