

Respond: The ABCs of Checking-In When you Suspect a Coworker is Experiencing Violence

You may have noticed some recent changes in a coworker's behavior or other concerning signs that have you worried for their safety and well-being. How you approach someone who you suspect may be experiencing a crisis, particularly if related to domestic violence, sexual assault or harassment, or stalking, has a significant influence on whether that individual will feel safe enough to share their situation with you and seek support. Starting the conversation can be a difficult first step. Here are a few basic tips to follow to create a space in which you can reach out to help your coworker.

I. Acknowledge changes in behavior

- Location matters. Have the conversation in a place that your coworker will find non-threatening and private.
- If you are a mandatory reporter, you should inform the individual of those obligations prior to starting the conversation so the individual is able to make an informed decision around what information they share, if any, as certain information may result in an investigator or other actions they may not want to pursue.

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- Start by sharing that you have noticed some worrisome changes in behavior or concerning events. Use “I statements,” keep to the facts, and reserve judgment.
- Share your concerns for their well-being.
- Recognize that the individual may be defensive or unable to share what they are experiencing. There are a number of reasons why someone in crisis may not share what they are experiencing – it may be unsafe to do so, they may be worried about job loss if people know their situation, or they may not recognize that they are experiencing harm.

Putting it all together:

Instead of this:

“You’ve been getting a lot of phone calls and texts which have been making you upset. What is going on?”

This approach is aggressive, tells the person how they are feeling, and sounds judgmental.

Try this:

“I’ve noticed that you’ve been getting a lot of calls and texts lately and I have noticed you seem upset after receiving them.”

This approach uses “I statements” and centers around observation and concern. It suggests the link between the calls and the individual’s behavior but does not make assumptions.

II. Be empathic and supportive

- Consider how one's identity may influence their experience and options available to them. For example, Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and immigrant communities may not feel safe reaching out to law enforcement; LGBTQ individuals experiencing violence may not want their sexual orientation revealed by sharing that a partner is abusing them.
- Do not push them to share anything or ask prying questions. Basic questions you may want to ask to learn more can potentially appear judgmental, threatening, or might convey that you do not believe them.
- If the individual says there is nothing wrong, do not press further, simply let them know that you care and want to support them if needed.
- Focus on what the individual needs to feel safe and successful in the workplace and ask the individual how you can help.
- Recognize that it can be difficult for individuals in crisis to know what they need in the moment. Discuss what you can specifically do to help within the context of the workplace. For example, "Would it be helpful if I answer your phone line for a while?"
- Ask how they would like to move forward and what ways you can continue to support them.
- Unless you are a mandatory reporter, keep what is shared confidential to build and maintain trust. If information must be disclosed, share what information must be provided and what the process looks like, while finding ways to give the person control over what happens next.

Putting it all together:

Instead of this:

“Let’s go to HR and report the individual who has been harassing you. We can’t let them get away with it.”

This approach tells the individual what they should do and does not provide them with alternatives to consider.

Try this:

“Here are the options that you have to report this behavior. If this is something you would like to pursue, I can help you through the process.”

This approach provides the individual with the information necessary to explore options. Furthermore, it is centered on their choices and wishes.

III. Connect to resources

- Outline relevant workplace policies and available resources and accommodations for individuals experiencing domestic violence, sexual assault or harassment, and stalking.
- Share resources such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), peer support networks, and local service providers, including culturally or identity-specific resources.
- Offer to accompany them as they pursue help from HR or outside organizations, if comfortable.
- Be an ally and make yourself available for future conversations.

- Ask how you can safely check-in with them in the future.
- Being an ally and providing support to those in crisis can be taxing; be sure to practice self-care, set boundaries, and seek additional help from experts when needed. You don't need to do this alone; the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#) and [National Sexual Assault Hotline](#) can help.

Putting it all together:

Instead of this:

“Hey, did you reach out to any of the resources I shared? Why not?”

This approach is more about the person offering help and not about the interests of the individual and their needs.

Try this:

“I'd like to check-in with you in a week if that's okay. How would you prefer we connect?”

This approach centers the individual's interests and asks what they would like to do, giving them power.