

# Workplace violence and aggression – advice for workers

This information sheet provides advice for workers about duties under work health and safety (WHS) laws and what to do if you experience workplace violence or aggression.

**If a worker or anyone at your workplace is in immediate danger, call 000.**

## What is workplace violence?

Workplace violence can be any incident where a person is abused, threatened or assaulted at the workplace or while they are carrying out work.

It can include physical assault, sexual assault, harassment or aggressive behaviour, such as stalking or verbal threats. It also includes violence from a family or domestic relationship when this occurs at your workplace, including if your workplace is your home.

Workplace violence might come from your customers, clients or members of the public, but it can also happen between workers, supervisors and managers. It may also happen away from your usual workplace but where you are still carrying out work, such as at your own home or a client's home.

## What work health and safety duties apply?

Violence and aggression can have significant short and long term impacts on a person's physical and psychological (mental) health. It can harm both the person it is directed at and anyone witnessing it.

It is not just physical forms of violence that are a problem - behaviours such as swearing, yelling, name-calling and taunting can also have serious long-term effects on a person's mental health and can escalate to more serious forms of violence.

## What does a PCBU need to do?

WHS laws require a person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU), such as your employer, to take care of the health and safety of workers (including contractors, apprentices and volunteers) and other people like visitors at your workplace.

Your employer must treat the risk of violence and aggression just as they would any other workplace hazard. This means they must eliminate or minimise the risk of violence and aggression as much as they reasonably can. Your employer should have measures in place to prevent violence and policies and procedures on how to address it if it happens. Information on these measures can be found in the Guide: [Preventing workplace violence and aggression](#).

In general, your employer should provide all workers with:

- a safe physical and online working environment
- safe work systems and procedures to prevent and respond to violence and aggression, such as procedures for working alone or at night
- a workplace policy which sets out how the workplace will prevent and respond to violence and aggression, including acceptable standards of behaviour of all workers, customers and clients, and
- information, training and supervision, such as how to use equipment like duress alarms, what to do during an incident, how to report incidents and how to access support services following an incident.

Your employer must also consult with you and your health and safety representatives (HSRs) about health and safety matters. You should raise any concerns you have about health and safety in your workplace with your employer, including concerns about violence or aggression. Your employer cannot discriminate against or disadvantage you for raising work health and safety concerns.

## What do workers need to do?

As a worker, you have a duty to take reasonable care of your own health and safety, and not adversely affect the health and safety of yourself or others. This means workers must not carry out acts of violence or aggressive behaviour towards co-workers or other people at the workplace. Workers must also follow any reasonable instruction given by your employer to comply with a health and safety duty (such as following workplace policies and procedures for preventing and responding to violence or aggression).

In some circumstances, you or your HSRs have the right to refuse to carry out or stop unsafe work. You have this right if there is a reasonable concern that you will be exposed to a serious risk to your health and safety from an immediate or imminent hazard, such as the threat of physical assault.

If you stop work because it is unsafe, you need to tell your employer as soon as possible. You must then be available to carry out suitable alternative work, including doing other tasks that you are trained or able to do, or performing your work from another location. In most circumstances, your HSR will need to consult with your employer before they direct you to, and you can, stop work.

## What should I do if I experience violence or aggression at work?

Your response to a violent or aggressive incident will vary depending on the nature and severity of the incident. Your employer should provide you with information and training about how to respond during an incident and how to report it.

During an incident you may choose to do one or more of the following:

- If it is safe to do so, you could use verbal de-escalation and distraction techniques. This may involve telling the other person that you object to their behaviour and ask that it stop. You may be able to resolve a situation before it escalates by pointing out that the behaviour is inappropriate and makes you feel unsafe. However, there are some circumstances where complying with the perpetrator's demands may be the safest response to minimise the risk of harm e.g. during an armed robbery.
- Communicate the need for help, such as seeking support from other workers, security personnel or people nearby. You may feel it is necessary to set off a duress alarm, if you have one available.

- Remove yourself from the situation, such as retreating to a safe location, asking the aggressor to leave the work area or disconnecting them from the phone call. Also see the information above about a worker's right to cease unsafe work.
- You may decide to seek help from Police, for example if the behaviour escalates to physical assault or the threat of physical assault.

After experiencing an incident, you should consider the following:

- Make sure you and other people are safe.
- Seek first aid or urgent medical attention where necessary.
- Seek support (including psychological support) from a colleague, helpline, counselling service or employee representative. A list of support services can be found at the end of this document.
- Keep a record of what happened, when and where it happened, who was involved and anything else you think may be important. Keep a screen shot if the behaviour occurs online.
- Report what happened to a supervisor, human resources area or the person designated by your organisation. Reporting unwanted or offensive behaviour early is often an effective way to prevent aggression escalating into more serious forms of violence. Your employer should have workplace policies or procedures in place on how to report incidents, how incidents will be dealt with and the support services available to you.
- At any time, you can contact your WHS regulator for further advice.

You may be worried that things will get worse if you report an incident at your workplace, particularly if the incident involves a co-worker. Remember, you have a right to feel safe at work. It is illegal for you to be disadvantaged because you have reported violence - if you are, you can seek help from the [Fair Work Ombudsman](#).

## Who else can help?

If the situation has not been resolved within your workplace, there are a number of agencies that may be able to offer you further advice and assistance:

- Your [WHS regulator](#) can provide you with information and investigate if any WHS laws have been breached. You can also contact your WHS regulator if you feel you have been discriminated against for raising a health and safety issue.
- If you feel you have been treated adversely by your employer because you reported violence, you can contact the [Fair Work Ombudsman](#) on 13 13 94.
- You can also contact the Fair Work Commission which provides [information about workplace bullying and harassment](#). They can be contacted [online](#) or by phone 1300 799 675.

## Further information

You may also find useful information on strategies for dealing with challenging workplace behaviours in [Dealing with workplace bullying - a worker's guide](#).

- For advice on dealing with sexual harassment in the workplace, see the Information sheet: [Workplace sexual harassment – advice for workers](#).
- Information about how a business can manage the health and safety risks of workplace violence is in the Guide: [Preventing workplace violence and aggression](#).

- For advice on family and domestic violence, see the Information sheet: [\*Family and domestic violence at the workplace\*](#).
- Information on safe cash handling procedures is in the Guide: [\*Transporting and handling cash\*](#).
- Advice for employers on managing risks to psychological health and safety can be found in the Guide: [\*Work-related psychological health and safety: A systematic approach to meeting your duties\*](#).

## Support services

### Beyond Blue

[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

1300 224 636

### Our Watch

[www.ourwatch.org.au](http://www.ourwatch.org.au)

### Lifeline

[www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

13 11 14

### 1800Respect

[www.1800respect.org.au](http://www.1800respect.org.au)

1800 737 732

### Sexual assault support services

[www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/list-sexual-assault-services](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/list-sexual-assault-services)