

WHEN DOMESTIC ABUSE ENTERS THE WORKPLACE

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In the face of fast-paced careers, long working hours, and tight schedules, it is commonplace for our coworkers to double as our personal friends and, in some cases, our romantic partners. A marriage between our peers can spread goodwill throughout our workplace; but, when that relationship goes awry, it can spell trouble for the employment atmosphere – particularly in cases where there is a history of domestic abuse.

When a couple separates, and their problems spill over into the workplace, one of the natural reactions is to ignore it. Most everyone has experienced a painful break-up at one point in their life, so it is easy to sympathize with someone who is having difficulty letting go – who continues phoning, or sending letters and flowers in an attempt to reconcile with their estranged partner. We may tell ourselves that it's simply a personal issue between a husband/wife or boyfriend/girlfriend, that it will resolve itself over time, and that it's better not to get involved. In most cases, this is true, but not in every case; so, we need to be able to discern between the subtleties that make that difference.

As a recent victim of “simple obsessional” stalking in the workplace, I learned firsthand what can happen when this type of domestic abuse is ignored rather than dealt with. An employee of the same company I worked for, my estranged husband stalked me for eight excruciating months.

Although I reported him to Management on several occasions, there were no formal investigations completed by anyone of authority, nor any significant attempt to remedy the situation early on. Rather, the harassment was enabled to continue to the point where my stalker was charged (and later convicted) with criminal harassment, and I was diagnosed with Acute Stress Disorder. Two months into my medical leave, I was compelled to resign, as I feared returning to a building where my stalker continued working.

It was an experience that turned my life upside down – one that cost me my health and, ultimately, my career. However, I am not the only one who paid a price. My employer was left with some hefty legal bills, and a couple of hard questions to answer: Why was this situation not investigated early on? Why was nothing done to stop it before it escalated into a criminal offence?

Perhaps, it was enabled to continue because, on the surface, it appeared to be nothing more than a case of chivalry: a heartbroken man trying to win back his wife; a lucky woman being showered with love letters, voice mails, gifts, and flowers on a regular basis.

Perhaps, it was enabled to continue because, below the surface, there were more critical signs that were overlooked: an initial restraining order that was violated; a subsequent

police warning that was ignored; my twenty-pound weight loss, lethargy, diminished health, and increased absenteeism; my numerous pleas for help.

Another misconception some employers have when dealing with domestic stalking in their workplace is the belief that it is out of their jurisdiction, and should therefore be handled by the police. Actually, it is the police officer's hands that are tied in such situations – when the victim and the accused are both employed by the same company.

All members of society have the right to security balanced with the rights of others to security: the police enforce our rights in society; employers enforce our rights in the workplace. Accordingly, when domestic abuse enters into the workplace, it becomes an issue of sexual harassment that must be dealt with by the employer.

The duty of all employers is to provide a safe working environment, and to closely investigate *all* allegations of harassment in their workplace, whether it is between a husband/wife, boyfriend/girlfriend, or any other combination. Consensual, reciprocal relationships do not constitute sexual harassment; but persistent, unwanted contact after the end of such a relationship does.

Employers who do not respond promptly and appropriately to complaints of this manner may find themselves in even worse circumstances down the road: dealing with the aftermath of escalated violence where several people are hurt; and, being held liable for that violence in a civil courtroom or human rights tribunal later on. So, if you ever find yourself in a situation where domestic abuse has entered your workplace, do not turn a blind eye – for the protection of us all.

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Kim S. is a published author, award-winning speaker, and creator/presenter of *The Awareness Series* speaking series. Her mission is to deal head-on with stigmatized social issues such as workplace harassment, domestic abuse, depression, and single parenting. Each of these presentations is a must-see, delivered from the most alluring viewpoint there is: that of the survivor.

www.kimsprofessionalkeynoter.com

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