

# Triage needed to combat workplace violence

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## *Part 1 of a three-part series*

Violence in the workplace has received a great deal of media attention in recent years, with a number of high-profile tragedies highlighting the potential for not only injury but also death. To protect your workers from harm — and yourself from potential legal liability — you need to implement multiple strategies.

Dr Kelly Watt, a Threat Assessment Specialist at [ProActive ReSolutions Inc.](#), based in Canada, recently spoke with *WorkplaceOHS* about this serious problem, including the steps employers and employees should take to tackle the risk of violence at work, regardless of whether the source of the risk is a co-worker, a client, a spouse or a community member.

Watt will be in Sydney and Melbourne next month (12 and 13 November, respectively) to present a series of workshops to help workers assess, manage and respond to a risk of violence in their workplaces.

What are the risk factors?

According to Watt, the root causes of violence — in the workplace and in other settings — are many and varied, and there are specific risk factors for different forms of violence such as intimate partner violence (eg patriarchal attitudes), stalking (eg obsessional thoughts), and sexual violence (eg sexual deviance).

However, between 50 and 75 per cent of the risk factors are the same regardless of the type of violence (eg substance use problems, relationship problems, mental health problems and work-related problems).

In the workplace, Watt says that **work-related stressors such as heavy workloads and bullying** can increase the risk of violence if an exposed worker has trouble coping. If these stressors persist, they can trigger other problems that increase the risk of violence, such as substance abuse. In other words, work-related problems can either increase violence risk directly if it leads to problems with stress and coping, or indirectly if it leads to other problems.

Regardless of the source of violence, Watt recommends organisations **take a multi-faceted approach** to addressing the risk of it occurring in their workplace.

The violence triage

For instance, a **violence triage process** should be implemented. This approach is a 'structured and evidence-based' strategy to help a workplaces determine whether **reasonable grounds** exist to be concerned about a risk of work-related violence.

Under this strategy, if there is a concern about someone posing a risk of violence, the first step is to identify whether one or more of the three primary warning signs exist. These primary warning signs are:

1. **Violent acts:** Actual, attempted or threatened physical harm, as well as a pattern of fear-inducing behaviours (eg stalking, harassment, intimidation).
2. **Violent ideation:** Thoughts, images, urges or fantasies related to violence (eg fantasies about hurting a co-worker).
3. **Violent intent:** This refers to someone who is plotting actual violence, and is taking steps towards meeting their objective (eg stockpiling weapons, drawing maps, developing escape plans).

If one or more of these primary warning signs are identified, it is then necessary to qualify if this behaviour is **(a) recent, (b) serious or (c) escalating** because, as Watt explains, while most people engage in violent acts or experience violence ideation at some point during their lifetime, it will not necessarily be recent, serious or escalating or outside the boundaries of normal human behaviour.

If a primary warning sign is identified and the behaviour is deemed recent, serious or escalating, then there will be reasonable grounds to have concern about a risk of work-related violence.

While there are also secondary warning signs (eg personal crisis, interpersonal conflict or acute mental distress) that if recent, serious or escalating, should be considered, these would not — when taken on their own — provide reasonable grounds to be concerned about someone posing a violence risk. Watt's recommendations include:

- **Have a formal system in place** to document the outcome of a triage (eg warning signs, risk posed, triage outcome, responses taken, responses planned) is critical. Keeping a record of a triage outcome will help a workplace determine how to prioritise violence risks and what immediate actions to take, but it might also prove critical if the matter comes before a court of law.
- If after going through the triage process you have reasonable grounds for being concerned about risk of violence, conduct **a comprehensive risk assessment**. If this isn't done internally, have it done by someone who is qualified to do that for your workplace.

- **Don't assume that a person does or does not pose a risk of violence without first going through the triage processes.** Failing to pay attention to the primary warning signs, for instance, could result in taking unnecessary action against a person who does not pose a violence risk, or responding too strongly or lightly to person who does pose a violence risk — this could, in fact, escalate the situation.

#### Other key strategies

Other key strategies to address work-related include developing policies and procedures on workplace violence, staff training, and — if it is feasible and appropriate to do so — establishing threat assessment teams.

Staff training is crucial

Watt says supervisors and other employees should be trained to **detect the primary and secondary warning signs**, to triage for violence risk, to respond appropriately to a given situation, and to ensure familiarity with the relevant policies and procedures.

The violence triage training must provide employees with **guidelines about how to document and communicate the outcome of their triage** and discuss different options with respect to putting the triage into practice.

Additional training that helps employees **learn how to de-escalate a situation** verbally and non-verbally and **defend themselves without using physical force** is also very important for prevention of violence. Different settings will have different guidelines as to how employees should defend themselves appropriately.

Watt says that a worker who identifies a primary warning sign should, firstly, treat it 'as they would if they heard a fire alarm', but not panic because 'there is a good chance that nothing bad is going to happen'. Secondly, the worker should 'take stock of the situation by trying to figure out what is actually going on, by determining how to report the situation and by deciding if any action needs to be taken to protect the immediate safety of others in the vicinity (eg leaving/escaping the situation or summoning help)'.  
  
Threat assessment teams

#### Threat assessment teams

Threat assessment teams can be established if there are sufficiently high rates of violence and high number of employees, and if there is adequate training, resources and experience.

These teams should be trained about violence risk assessment and management and how to take a multidisciplinary approach to their work.

The Workplace Violence Prevention and Intervention Standards developed by ASIS International (ASIS) and Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) provide guidelines for taking a multidisciplinary approach to assessing and managing risk for workplace violence, including establishing threat management teams.

Watt says these standards have international implications and should be reviewed by all organisations committed to addressing the issue of violence in the workplace.

**Part 2:** *The risk of intimate partner violence spilling over into the workplace, and why a 'zero tolerance' policy might not be appropriate in your workplace.*



James Harkness

James Harkness is a staff writer for WorkplaceOHS and Workplace Info, whose role includes producing case write-ups, news stories, and analysis pieces. He has also produced copy and performed editorial tasks for a handful of business chambers operating in Inner City Sydney. [more from James](#)

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