

Mental Health Awareness and Women's Healthcare Month



May is Mental Health Awareness and Women's Healthcare Month. I think it is significant that they both occur in the same month because, more often than not, how a woman feels mentally will affect how she seeks and chooses healthcare for herself.

The most significant cross-section of mental health and women's health is related to domestic violence. Domestic violence is a prevalent and leading psychological and physical health issue for women. It can have a significant adverse effect on a person's mental and physical well-being.

Domestic violence is more prevalent among US women than breast cancer and diabetes combined. Domestic violence is more common among pregnant women than pre-eclampsia and gestational diabetes.

The CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) says 1 in 3 women experience domestic violence. 1 in 7 women will be injured by an intimate partner in their lifetime. These rates are thought to be significantly higher for the LGBTQ and other marginalized communities. The extent of the violence varies widely, but unfortunately, abusive behaviors such as slapping, shoving, and pushing are often **not** considered to be "domestic violence."

Don't be fooled into thinking that domestic or intimate partner violence is only confined to poor, minority, uneducated, and underprivileged women. Nothing can be further from the truth. Among women who are highly educated and earn high incomes, the rates of domestic violence are similar to women from other socioeconomic levels.

But just like most women of domestic abuse, women with higher incomes often take on a great deal of guilt, and they judge and blame themselves for becoming victims. They usually feel as if they should have known better than to put themselves into an abusive situation and may be reluctant to seek out help because of embarrassment. In most instances, they are ashamed to tell anyone of the abuse because domestic violence is not viewed as a prevalent issue for women who are highly educated and of significant economic means.

A study released by The Violence Policy Center in 2023 says violence against women increased in the US in 2020. The evidence points to the COVID-19 Pandemic as the culprit due to prolonged isolation caused by social distancing. This is what that study revealed:

- Approximately 2,100 females were victims of homicide.
- 89% were murdered by a male they knew or had an intimate relationship with.
- 75% of those killed were attempting to leave the relationship or after the relationship had ended.

Each year, more than 10 million people are victims of domestic abuse. Here's what that looks like:

- 85% are female.
- 66% of females who are injured by intimate partners never receive medical care for their injuries. These untreated injuries often turn into long-term chronic conditions.
- Female victims of domestic violence are twice as likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), and alcoholism.
- Female domestic violence victims suffer from hypertension, diabetes, smoking, inactivity, and obesity 24% more than women who aren't abused.
- 78% of women who were murdered in their workplace were murdered by their abuser.
- Each year, an estimated 13,000 women are victims of violence committed by intimate partners while at work.

Often, even when domestic violence victims want to leave, they can't because they may have children and may depend on their partner's income for their survival. This is what they face if they leave:

- Each year, female victims of domestic violence lose more than 8 million workdays.
- Between 21%-60% of female domestic violence victims lose their jobs due to reasons stemming from their abuse.
- Female domestic violence victims lose as much as \$18 million in annual earnings mainly due to job loss or absenteeism. Since only 1 in 4 cases of domestic violence is officially reported, the yearly earnings loss is thought to be as much as \$100 million, according to experts.
- Females are more than 30% more likely to call in sick than men, per NIH (National Institutes of Health); domestic violence can't be ruled out as having a significant impact on this statistic.

- 94%-99% of domestic violence victims have funds and access to those funds controlled by their abuser.
- 1/2 of all homeless women and children in the US are fleeing from domestic violence situations.
- Women who decide to leave their abuser increase their chances of being murdered.

Many organizations are reluctant to talk about domestic violence. The misnomer is that domestic violence **does not** affect an organization; it is considered to be a "personal problem" of the employee that companies should distance themselves from. We can no longer ignore how profoundly domestic violence affects the worker's physical and mental health and the health of the organization's bottom line as much or more than any other health condition.

The above statistics show that most of the dollars spent on wellness and EAPs implemented by organizations are usually for chronic health conditions, much like the ones victims of abuse suffer from. In addition, the rate of absenteeism and decreased productivity that is prevalent among abuse victims can no longer be overlooked as an issue that has no significant bearing on a company's profit margins.

Consider the following research from the Integrated Benefits Institute (IBI):

- Employees covered for sick time, workers' compensation, disability, and FMLA benefits are absent an estimated 978 million days because of illness.
- Employees lose approximately 540 million workdays by underperforming at their jobs due to a chronic health condition (also known as presenteeism).
- Poor health costs employers in the US an average of \$575 billion in lost productivity.
- For every dollar of the nearly \$950 billion spent on health care benefits by US employers, an additional \$0.61 of productivity is lost to illness and injury."
- It can cost an organization 3X-4X a worker's annual salary to replace them.
- US Organizations lose \$11 billion annually due to employee turnover.
- Employees suffering from depression cost employers approximately \$44 billion annually related to loss of productivity.

Workers spend one-third of their time at work. The workplace is a convenient way to disseminate information to employees. The best thing organizations can do to help domestic violence victims is to recognize and talk about it.

Be sure that domestic violence is discussed among male and female employees alike.

While domestic violence primarily affects females, males are also victims. Regardless of gender, your employees should know they will be supported if they come to your organization for help. Other things organizations may want to try:

- Check with your HR and Legal Departments to implement policies that support employees who need assistance. If you are unsure where to start, contact [SHRM](#)(Society for Human Resource Management) for help.
- Adopt policies that allow for flexible work arrangements.
- Collaborate and partner with local support organizations to help establish a safety net for employees.
- Talk about and invest in training to recognize signs of abuse.

If your organization doesn't currently have a domestic violence policy, you can start supporting your employees who may be victims by distributing a copy of [The National Resources For Victims and Survivors of Domestic Violence](#).

W4TWP has compiled a list of these national resources specifically for this purpose. This document can be made even more impactful when individuals and organizations find and add local resources and services that are also pertinent and helpful to your organization, employees, and the surrounding community.

[The National Resources For Victims and Survivors of Domestic Violence](#) list provided in this article, or any other resource, is only valuable if your employees can access it. That's why it's crucial to discuss available resources openly, post a copy in conspicuous places within the workplace, email it to employees, and post it on your company's website or intranet. The method of dissemination is less important than the action itself. It's essential to do something, anything, to ensure the information reaches your employees or any victim of domestic violence.

I encourage everyone who reads this article, whether an individual or organization representative, to provide the corresponding link or print out the resource list and give it to as many people as possible. These resources, and ones local to your area, can be vital and lifesaving to a person(s) suffering from domestic violence.