

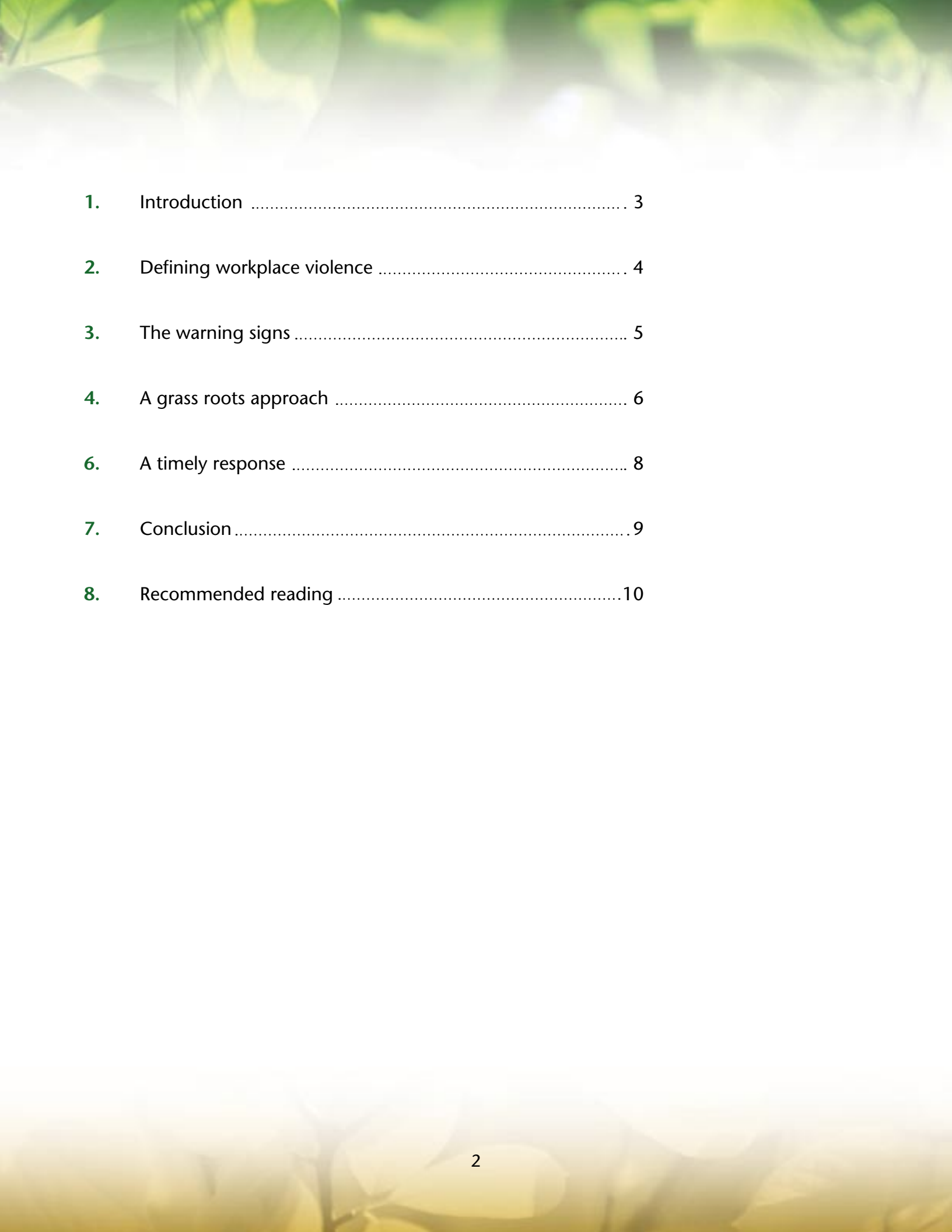
GROUP LIFE
& HEALTH

ONLINE EDUCATIONAL BOOKLET
AVOIDING VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE

Well.
And well worth it.



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Introduction

A disgruntled, downsized employee returns to his former workplace and exacts revenge by shooting his boss. A bank is robbed. An envelope containing suspicious white powder is received by a mail room, sent by an individual bypassed for promotion. We've all read disturbing media accounts of violent incidents in a workplace, but what if such an act happened in your office? Would you spot the trouble beforehand? Better still, does your organization actively and vigorously promote a safe, supportive workplace?

These actions aren't necessary in Canada you say? Not so. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), Canada is among the top five nations worldwide in terms of workplace assaults – the U.S. ranked ninth. The ILO cites a 1994 CUPE Health and Safety survey which claimed that nearly 70 percent of respondents experienced "verbal aggression" as a leading form of workplace violence. In addition, 40 percent said they had been struck while in the workplace with an additional 30 percent claiming to have been either grabbed or scratched.

From verbal abuse to murder, workplace violence causes irreparable harm to the emotional health of employees and the reputation and financial bottom line of organizations. Some estimate that the average direct cost to employers of a single episode of workplace violence can amount to \$250,000 in lost work time and legal expenses associated with litigations and legislative non-compliance.

A company risks far more than direct financial loss. They risk low morale, reduced productivity, rising absentee rates and disability claims, increased employee turnover, more grievances and occupation health claims and a permanently damaged public reputation. Customers and investors shy away from companies they view as mismanaged.

Here's how you, as a manager, can help ensure your staff continues to work in a safe and nurturing environment.

More information and assistance is available through Expert-Aide, a service that offers professional coaching and consultation for managers to help them deal with employees who are facing difficulties. Orientation sessions and online booklets are also available, as are referral services for employees who are facing difficulties that effect, or could affect, their job performance. Contact Expert-Aide at 1 866 314-9533 (English service) or 1 866 314-9534 (service en français).

Defining workplace violence

When we think of workplace violence, murder and/or physical attacks immediately spring to mind. However, workplace violence is a much broader problem. The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines workplace violence as “any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work.” These behaviours could originate from customers or co-workers at any level of the organization. This definition would include all forms of harassment, bullying, intimidation, physical threats, assaults, robbery and other intrusive behaviour.

According to the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) workplace violence also includes:

- **threatening behaviour** such as shaking fists, destroying property or throwing objects.
- **verbal or written threats**, indeed, any expression of an intent to inflict harm.
- **harassment** – any behaviour that demeans, embarrasses, humiliates, annoys, alarms or verbally abuses a person and that is known or would be expected to be unwelcome. This includes words, gestures, intimidation, bullying or other inappropriate activities.
- **verbal abuse** – swearing, insults or condescending language.
- **physical attacks** – hitting, shoving, pushing or kicking.

Rumours, swearing, verbal abuse, pranks, arguments, property damage, vandalism, sabotage, theft, physical assaults, psychological trauma, anger-related incidents, rape, arson and murder are all examples of workplace violence. The CCOHS states that workplace violence is not limited to incidents that occur within a traditional workplace. Work-related violence can occur at off-site business-related functions such as conferences and trade shows, at social events related to work, in clients’ homes or away from work but resulting from work, for example, a threatening telephone call to your home from a client.

The warning signs

You see, workplace violence **can** be prevented. In fact, in at least **85 percent of incidents, there are clear warning signs**. Intervention before an incident occurs reduces the potential for violent incidents. Managers need to recognize signs and symptoms of a potentially violent individual and learn how to be aware of possible signs of abuse among employees, such as frequent absences.

Watch for:

- direct or indirect threats to another employee;
- intimidation, harassment, bullying, aggression or inappropriate behaviour;
- regular conflicts with co-workers or managers;
- a weapon of any kind brought to the workplace or an inappropriate reference made to weapons;
- statements that indicate a fascination with violence or violent behaviour;
- open disregard for the personal rights of others;
- statements indicating desperation over personal problems;
- suicidal comments or contemplation;
- substance use or abuse; and
- extreme changes in behaviour such as sudden isolation, aggressive behaviour, etc.

Is there a typical violent employee?

The profile of the “typical” violent employee is one who is male, Caucasian and between 25 and 40 years of age. The most observable characteristics include a history of previous violence, a quick temper, explosions of anger, threats, allusions to other violent acts and offenders, excessive interest in weapons and the military, bizarre statements, and notes on the actions of others who they perceive to be the cause of their problems.

The violent employee has also likely experienced difficulties outside work, such as marital problems, or had been terminated in an insensitive manner.

However, profiles are limited. As work demographics change, so will this profile.

Creating a prevention policy

Obviously, the key to resolving the issue of violence in the workplace is prevention. Managers can play a strong role in communicating a violence prevention policy to employees.

As a manager, it is absolutely imperative to **take every complaint seriously, no matter how trivial it may appear**. Pre-existing events about which you have no knowledge could have triggered the episode.

- Clearly indicate to your staff what workplace violence entails and that it is not only physical assault.
- Clearly convey zero tolerance for any form of violence in the workplace and define the consequences for every possible action. Ensure HR policies are in place to address any violence that does occur. For example, any form of physical violence is punished by dismissal.
- Define how to report aggressive acts or violence if they occur. Clearly identify roles for reporting violence and the documentation, investigation and delivery of consequences.
- Don't accuse prematurely. Instead, put proper investigative procedures in place and communicate these to employees.
- Define how employees who are being victimized will be protected.
- Establish a trauma response program if one does not already exist. Timely, on-site debriefings for individuals or groups who might be affected by an incident will help your staff cope and speed up the return to business.
- Evaluate your security programs regularly to best determine if they are meeting company and employee needs. Does your organization have people on hand who could disarm or physically subdue and control a violent employee?

- If not already in place, consider security training, use of security professionals, monitoring systems, limited access key cards, strict visitor sign-in policies, new employee background screening and safety awareness and training.

A violence prevention policy should include a security action plan such as contingency planning and safety and security training. Let your staff know your company's actions around security and safety to ease anxiety.

It's been shown that such policies and procedures result in:

- a reduction in grievances
- fewer occupational health claims
- minimizing legal costs associated with litigation and legislative non compliance
- an enhanced corporate image
- a reduction in absenteeism

A grass roots approach

Work collaboratively for a common goal

To maintain a safe and secure working environment, consider the following guidelines:

- Establish a peer team to act as first responders in providing support for those in need.
- Create a cross-functional committee on violence prevention to promote buy-in from all corporate levels. Work together to develop procedures, ensure rules are followed and provide outreach to peers. This could include the use of an employee assistance program.
- Work with a professional association to establish a violence prevention awareness program. This could include development and implementation of workshops and communication materials that promote a violence-free workplace.
- Provide training for employees. Review the violence prevention policy and strongly communicate rules and consequences.

A timely response

A violent workplace incident presents serious challenges for any organization, big or small. Just as in day-to-day work activities, it's the manager who must take charge and deal with the situation. Prompt, clear action can lessen the impact of the incident on other employees, diffuse an already explosive situation and provide leadership in a chaotic situation. It's essential to facilitate a rapid and effective response by following these 10 steps:

1. Assess what happened immediately.
2. Again, DO NOT downplay an incident.
3. Facilitate communication, where necessary, to police and emergency personnel, security and other employees.
4. Remove employees from the situation immediately, depending on its visibility.
5. Provide employees with medical attention, if required. Give outreach to the victim or group by offering emotional support. Consult with your EAP provider and offer debriefings for those who witnessed, or were affected by, the incident.
6. Provide employees with information on normal responses to trauma.
7. Be aware of your own reactions to the event. Lead by example. In terms of self-care, don't be reluctant to ask for support in managing your own responses.
8. Help victims make connections with loved ones.
9. Document the incident thoroughly.
10. Follow through with consequences for the employee who committed the violent act, as outlined in your violence prevention policy.

Conclusion

To minimize hostility and harassment, fostering a workplace culture of mutual respect is a great place to begin – and end. In such an environment, employees receive a degree of independence in their work with ongoing support and recognition from their manager. Open communication spawns a relatively conflict-free workplace and the motivation to co-operate with colleagues.

Meanwhile, managers can ensure that employees receive a variety of training to positively resolve conflicts. This can range from cross-cultural awareness programs to address the needs of culturally diverse work teams, to an EAP for personal counseling or accessing coaching for individuals or groups who are experiencing issues that could negatively affect their work performance and interaction with co-workers.

Ideally, workplace violence will not occur, but if it does, managers must manage it quickly and effectively. The key is to develop and implement clear policies, backed by support and response programs that help victims cope and that get your company's focus back on business.

For assistance with, or more information on, violence in the workplace, contact Expert-Aide at 1 866 314-9533 (English service) or 1 866 314-9534 (service en français).

Recommended reading

The Violence-Prone Workplace: A New Approach to Dealing with Hostile, Threatening, and Uncivil Behavior

by Richard V Denenberg and Mark Braverman

Occupational Health Guide to Violence in the Workplace

by Thomas D. Schneid

Managing Violence in the Workplace

by Thomas K. Capozzoli and R. Steve McVey

Violence in the Workplace: A Prevention and Management Guide for Businesses

by S. Anthony Baron

The Violence-Prone Workplace: A New Approach to Dealing with Hostile, Threatening, and Uncivil Behavior

by Richard V. Denenberg and Mark Braverman

Adult Bullying: Perpetrators and Victims

by Peter Randall

Preventing and Responding to Violence at Work

by Duncan Chappell and Kimberly Ann Rodgers

Profiling the Lethal Employee: Case Studies of Violence in the Workplace

by Michael D. Kelleher



Keeping our word is standard

