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## Preparing for the unthinkable: Violence in the workplace

No one wants to think about it, let alone prepare for it. But violence in the workplace has become a very real thing today. It could happen in your dental office. Get your staff prepared.

Mar 19th, 2015

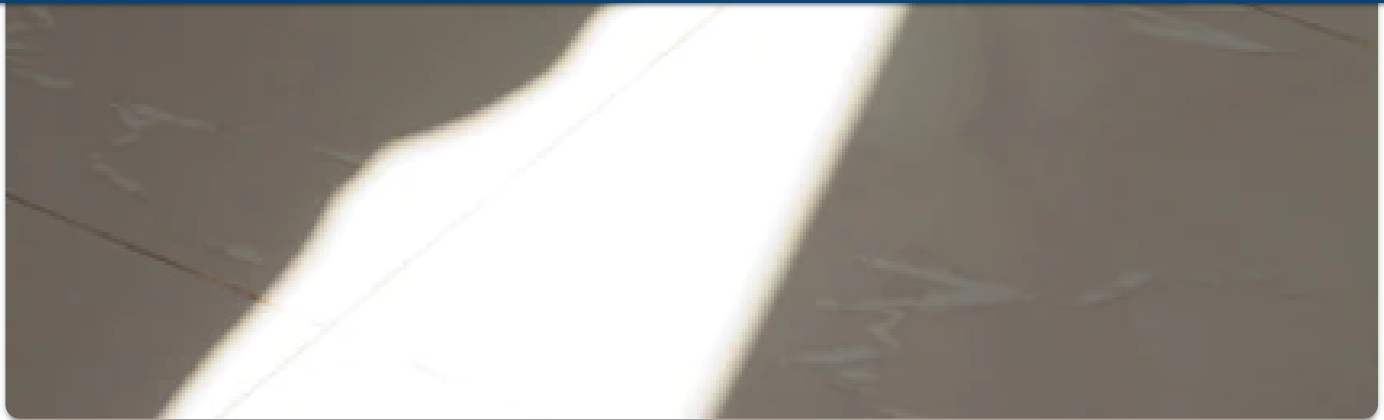


We don't like to talk about it. We don't even want to think about it. But we're bombarded with media stories about violence in the workplace, and we need to be prepared, just in case.

that homicide is the second leading cause of death on the job for women. These are alarming trends!

Thankfully, offices of health-care practitioners did not make the list for being at high risk for violence (that award went to the taxi industry). But it is nevertheless prudent to have a plan and get your team on board with it, just in case the unthinkable were to occur.





After all, you take precautions to keep your workplace and your employees safe from harmful substances, to prevent accidents, and to ensure the safety of your patients. But if someone came into your office right now with a weapon, would your team know exactly what to do?

Here are some tips for dealing with the possibility of violence, along with some training guidelines that incorporate the need for all employees to share responsibility for maintaining a violence-free workplace.

- 1. Conduct a risk assessment of your work environment** – Are there back door exits that are unlocked from the inside during office hours? Would they be convenient escape routes? Is there adequate lighting in the hallways, parking lots, and entryways? Are there decorative items in the reception area that could be used as weapons? At what times of day might employees be most at risk?
- 2. Don't ignore warning signs** – Most people who commit violent acts communicate before they carry out their plan. Is there an employee who is acting unusually paranoid, is fixated on violence or weapons, is socially isolated, or is being hypercritical of coworkers, supervisors, or office procedures? Has a patient made threats, either verbally, by email, phone, or in writing? Does a third-party vendor have a family member who's been making threats of violence? Is an employee involved in a domestic dispute in which he or she has been subjected to stalking, threats, or physical violence at home?
- 3. Take the "zero tolerance" approach** – Employees need to receive clear instructions that any threatening communication or behavior, whether from another employee, a patient, a family member, or anyone else, must be reported to management immediately. Management must take some action after receiving a report, i.e., investigate and document at a minimum.
- 4. Plan, plan, plan!** – Use the team approach to deal with a potential workplace violence episode. Give each employee a task and go through a trial run, like a fire drill, so that everyone has the opportunity to practice his or her role. Sometimes local police offer free or low-cost training in violence preparedness. Call your local authorities to inquire.

need to be as prepared and trained as possible. The best way to accomplish this is to plan your office's response. Make sure all employees have clear and concise instructions for handling such a situation.

Also, discuss during training the fact that some people show visible signs of violence before acting out. While no one expects office staff to read early warning signs to the same degree a trained psychologist would, many signals are obvious and at least raise a red flag or warrant careful monitoring.

At a minimum, go over an emergency procedure with your employees and hold a mock workplace violence drill to make sure everyone knows and understands what to do.

**Here's a list of topics to discuss and decide on before the drill:**

- Establish an emergency code. In the event that someone enters the office exhibiting behavior that indicates possible violence, the emergency code will alert everyone to the situation. The code is whatever you choose.
- Designate staff to give the alarm and respond. Example: When the designated staff person (usually the receptionist) pages everyone with the emergency code, another designated staff person will respond immediately by calling 9-1-1.
- Instruct employees what to do in case of robbery. Example: Hand over all cash and cooperate fully.
- Require all employees to report threats made by anyone, a patient, family member, etc.
- Assure confidentiality for any employees who report threats.

Remember, while workplace violence is hard to think about, and the topic may be stressful to address with employees, disaster is *not* the only possible outcome. There are also situations in which potentially harmful situations have been prevented, calmed down, and safely resolved, especially when there was advance preparation.

More than 70% of U.S. workplaces lack a procedure or policy addressing workplace violence, so let's change that statistic right now and make the workplace safer.

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