



## Topics of Interest

# Resources for Defusing Workplace Violence

Meteorologists have it easy. They have sophisticated tools to track an approaching storm. But recognizing dangerous turbulence in the workplace is a lot tougher. Is an employee or co-worker simply under the weather or about to spin out of control? How can you spot potential trouble before it strikes?

"There's a heightened sense of concern about violence in the workplace," says clinical psychologist Gary L. Wood, president of Wood & Associates, P.A., a Tampa-based consulting firm that specializes in Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services. "Not every threat made by someone constitutes a risk for a violent act. But every threat should be taken seriously."

Most companies have policies and security measures in place to deal with physical threats from outside sources. But some companies, especially smaller ones, may not have the internal resources to help their employees and management identify potential sources of violence inside the workplace. A complete program to address this important safety and health issue should address both external and internal factors.

A growing number of companies are turning to outside Employee Assistance Program (EAP) professionals who are trained to work with employers and individual employees to help them deal with issues surrounding workplace tension and potentially dangerous situations.

When a company has contracted with an EAP provider, employees can contact the provider confidentially, either by phone or in person, to discuss any concern, whether it's their own frustration level or apprehension about an uncomfortable or threatening workplace situation. Managers and supervisors can also make use of the EAP for

consultation about problem employees. The EAP can be successful because it provides a "safety valve" for troubled employees and advice for the people who work around them.

"The EAP is not a substitute for the company's own human resources department," says Wood. "We advise managers and supervisors to contact their human resources department first, to review company policies and procedures, before referring an employee to the EAP."

"We talk with individuals who may be concerned about themselves, or feel like they're losing control," says Wood. "We encourage people to contact us before harm comes to anyone."

Family members of the employee covered by an EAP can also make use of the services in complete confidence as well.

Some people will not come to an EAP provider on their own, however, and in those cases managers or supervisors can make use of EAP resources to learn how to handle a particular case.

### **Potential "Triggers"**

"In nearly every work environment, there's an increased demand on people to perform," says Wood. "For individuals who have extraordinary frustrations, this increased level of demand is amplified."

Changes in supervision, workload, performance goals and other factors contribute to higher levels of stress on the job, and that stress can trigger conflict in any organization.

"Conflict is normal," Wood emphasizes. "It's normal for people to react to conflict with concern, apprehension and frustration. Those expressions are acceptable. Threats are unacceptable. Employers should not tolerate violence or threats of violence in the workplace."

Wood offers a few factors that, while not intended to diagnose any individual, could be warning signs of an

**employee's likelihood of becoming violent.**

**A history of violent acts;  
Access to weapons;  
Emotional instability;  
Substance abuse;  
Long standing frustrations;  
Social isolation.**

**Other changes in behavior could indicate that an employee may be a victim of domestic violence or abuse, says Wood. A violent relationship not only affects the safety of an employee at home, but could potentially spill over into the workplace, affecting others' safety as well. Workers and their managers should pay attention to signs of domestic difficulties such as an employee's unexplained bruises or other injuries, an excessive number of personal phone calls, or the unannounced appearance of an employee's domestic partner at the workplace.**

**"If managers and supervisors notice these kinds of changes in an employee, especially if there are indications of physical harm, they should contact their company's human resources department. If an EAP is in place, the EAP consultants can be a resource for coaching and counseling on how to intervene," Wood says. "Early communication and intervention with troubled employees can be very successful. EAP professionals can help an organization and its employees find ways to solve difficult problems, working toward solutions that fit within their value system."**

**Don't go it alone**

**"It can be difficult for employees or managers to ask for support," says Wood. "They think they should be able to solve every problem on their own. Often they sit on problems too long. To weather any potentially volatile workplace situation, find out what resources your company offers—before trouble strikes. And remember, you don't have to go it alone."**

**Wood & Associates, P.A. is a Tampa-based consulting firm that provides Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services to help employers maintain productivity, safety and behavioral health in the workplace.**