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A painful secret divulged - and a course of action

By SUSAN PINKER

From Saturday's Globe and Mail

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Dear Susan,

Someone I supervise disclosed to me that a workplace colleague had confided to her that she is a victim of domestic abuse. What should I do now?

- *Cat's Out of the Bag*

Dear Cat,

Go back to the confidante and ask her to initiate a supportive follow-up chat with her colleague. She has to be the one to convince her co-worker to seek help. You can't, as you didn't hear it from the horse's mouth.

"This was a breach of privacy," says a taken-aback Rajpattie Persaud, a family lawyer in Montreal.

"If the victim wanted a supervisor to know, he or she would have told her herself. Now, if the supervisor intervenes, the worker will wonder, 'Is the whole office gossiping about me?' " says Ms. Persaud, adding that most people are so ashamed and worried about the stigma of domestic violence that they're reluctant to divulge the details to anyone.

But the employee did muster up the courage to tell someone and, whether the colleague who told you likes it or not, the ball is now in her court.

She has a moral obligation to try to assist. Your role is to support the employee who approached you. Here's how:

1. Tell her to reassure the co-worker that help is at hand, if she wants it. She should establish whether the co-worker is safe. If there's an immediate threat, your employee should treat it as one would any medical emergency: Offer to take her to seek help. "It's no different than if a colleague approaches you and says, 'I just broke my leg, what should I do?' " says Jennifer Swanberg, an associate professor of social work at the University of Kentucky, who researches the intersection between domestic violence and the workplace.

There is a list of women's shelters in Canada at shelternet.ca. The employee can also help her colleague conduct a Web search of other local resources.

2. Tell her to encourage her co-worker to seek assistance and counselling specifically designed for victims of domestic violence. The woman's family doctor or your workplace employee assistance program can make referrals, and help her take the first difficult steps. Tell your employee to emphasize to her that no one will force her to make decisions she is not prepared to make.

3. Ask the employee who approached you to transmit the message that disclosing her situation to you will not result in any disciplinary action, and that information shared will be treated confidentially. Tell her that talking to you, or to another supportive supervisor, may be the way to get some short-term assistance, such as a paid leave of absence, or connections to useful resources, such as ongoing counselling for her or her children, or legal services.

Remind your employee that, while she should make these suggestions, she should not be sharing this sensitive information with anyone. That is the prerogative of the person in the abusive situation.

Nor should she pass judgment on her co-worker. Contrary to popular belief, domestic abuse is more commonly reported by native-born Canadians than by immigrants, according to a 2006 report by the Canadian Medical Association, and the problem, though exacerbated by financial or other pressures, doesn't discriminate according to educational level, religion or socio-economic class. It's an equal-opportunity scourge.

4. As a manager, you should investigate whether your workplace has a policy that might address this situation. Many public institutions and large corporations have instituted action plans that address harassment and abuse, including what to do in cases of suspected domestic violence. The Canadian government also provides an online list of provincial policies and programs at safecanada.ca/link_e.asp?category=1&topic=3.

Although victims of domestic abuse often feel powerfully conflicting allegiances, not to mention the fear of blowback should they divulge such personal information at work, those who do ask for help at work are more likely to receive the support they need and to be employed a year later, according to a 2007 study of almost 500 women by Prof. Swanberg and her colleagues.

But the advisability of disclosing domestic abuse depends on the context. It's important to choose a sympathetic, informed ear, not someone who may blame the victim, Prof. Swanberg qualified in a telephone interview about her findings. So much hinges on transmitting that secret to someone willing to help.

While many may see home and work as two hermetically sealed spheres, a 2005 study by University Michigan researcher Richard Tolman showed that domestic violence shaved off the number of hours women can work per year - regardless of their mental or physical health. And another study published by Prof. Swanberg the same year showed that 71 per cent of women living in abusive situations couldn't concentrate at work, or were experiencing forms of sabotage that directly interfered with their performance on the job.

"They called in sick because they were too upset to work. Or tactics occurred before [the victim] left in the morning, such as someone stealing the car keys, interfering with child care, or physically preventing the person from leaving the house," Prof. Swanberg says.

She also describes other forms of harassment, such as threatening phone calls during the workday, or stalking.

These scenarios make you contemplate the predicaments - and painful secrets - of people who surround you every working day.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of [The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap](#). Her blog, on the science of human relationships can be found at www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-open-mind

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