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| Support for staff impacted by family violence |
| Guide for health service managers |

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# Introduction

This guidance aims to support health service managers in responding to staff disclosures of family violence. This resource is based on Victoria’s [Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Risk Management (MARAM) Framework](https://www.vic.gov.au/family-violence-multi-agency-risk-assessment-and-management) <https://www.vic.gov.au/family-violence-multi-agency-risk-assessment-and-management>.

**Please note:** This guide is not intended for services using the Strengthening Hospital Responses to Family Violence (SHRFV) initiative, and its Family Violence Workplace Support Program.

## Family violence

* Family violence is behaviour towards a family member(s) that is physically, sexually, economically, emotionally or psychologically abusive. It includes threatening, coercive, controlling or dominating behaviour, including abuse that is discriminatory, exploitative, neglectful and/or restrictive. It causes the victim survivor to fear for their safety or wellbeing, or that of another family member or adult.[[1]](#footnote-2)
* Family violence is unlawful. Legal action can be taken against adults for family violence that is a criminal offence, such as stalking, physical assault, sexual assault, threats, pet abuse, property damage and theft. Some risk factors recognised as family violence may be the subject of a family violence intervention order.[[2]](#footnote-3)
* Family violence is gendered and exploits power inequalities. It affects certain groups more as adults who use family violence often target people based on gender, characteristics, circumstances or experience.

## Employer obligations

* Health services as employers must, so far as is reasonably practical, provide and maintain for employees, including independent contractors, a working environment that is safe and without risk to health. This general duty includes providing and maintaining systems of work that are, so far as is reasonably practicable, safe and without risks to health.[[3]](#footnote-4)
* Employers can support staff who experience family violence by stabilising risks, lessening impacts and supporting their recovery. Health services should do so in a way that validates and empowers staff.
* Victim survivors should not face discrimination or adverse action relating to work due to family violence.
* Employers should develop policies and trauma-informed support for staff undertaking family violence work.
* An employer who is informed of risks – including of people who use violence who are also employees – can better plan for the possibility of family violence arising[[4]](#footnote-5) and provide support to affected staff.
* Services prescribed to MARAM need to consider what support staff and clients need, including for cultural safety and accessibility, and to address their language, service access and engagement barriers.[[5]](#footnote-6)
* Employers can help prevent and respond to family violence by providing a psychologically safe and supportive environment.[[6]](#footnote-7)

## Respecting privacy

If a line manager thinks, from observation, that an employee may be experiencing family violence, but they have not disclosed it, their manager can seek advice from limited, specific areas. Managers can confidentially discuss their concern with their family violence contact officer or employee assistance program (EAP).

Family violence is a private and personal matter for the affected person, and it is not appropriate for managers to discuss the issue more broadly. A manager’s role is to support the employee, not to identify or name family violence for them, and any decisions should be made by the person experiencing the violence.

Each employee maintains their personal right to privacy, including if they disclose that they are experiencing family violence. The employee can decide if they want to talk about their experience and has the right to change their decision at any time.

# The impact of family violence

## Staff impact

* Paid work and worksites are a crucial protective factor against family violence.[[7]](#footnote-8) Work provides people with necessary income, safety, support and focus when people who use violence are undermining them. This is important as victim survivors may have been financially abused or disadvantaged, had to move homes more often to be safe or be somewhere affordable, and may have their support networks eroded.
* Staff are individuals above all, with talent, potential and skills. Surviving involves advanced skills including analysis, insight, organisation, commitment, resourcefulness, dexterity, advocacy and mobilising support.
* A victim survivor managing their safety and the impact of violence is in a challenging situation which they know and are the expert on. Health service managers need to respect each victim survivor’s skills, strengths, insights and supports that help them be safe.
* Victim survivors of family violence may have been disadvantaged previously from poor accommodation of their needs, resulting in them changing jobs at short notice or having to take casual or part-time work.[[8]](#footnote-9)
* Victim survivors risk discrimination from colleagues who may blame a victim survivor and treat them as if they are exaggerating, exposing their workplace and workmates to a threat, avoiding work and/or rorting the system. Employer messaging should reject these common myths and protect employees against prejudice and discrimination.

## Workplace impact

* WorkSafe considers family violence a workplace issue when its effects extend to the workplace. Family violence can occur in the workplace if a person who uses violence attends or enters the workplace, including as a co-worker of the victim survivor.[[9]](#footnote-10)
* Family violence can threaten the safety of the employee who is subjected to family violence and their co-workers, supervisors and clients. Impacts can range from interference felt by all employees to serious assault against an individual. For example, a person using violence entering a workplace can pose a physical threat to people and property, and threaten safety and productivity due to distractions.
* Family violence can occur to anyone at any level across your service. Family violence policies, procedures and guidelines can mitigate risk, strengthen protections, and improve morale, retention and productivity. Family violence can affect the workplace because staff health and wellbeing can suffer. It may affect their ability to travel to or stay at work, or distract or tire them, impacting productivity, health and safety.[[10]](#footnote-11)
* Family violence may reduce an individual’s performance, presence and continuity of employment. This is caused by the person who uses violence, often as a control tactic. This tactic may emerge at work if the person who uses violence emails, calls or appears at the workplace. For the organisation, these impacts may increase staff turnover, and lead to resignations or avoidable dismissal.
* Family violence can affect people’s confidence and trust in authority. This is because people who use violence abuse power and may manipulate systems to abuse victim survivors. Ideally, victim survivors should choose their own counsel and be accommodated in situations needing confidence, e.g. interviews.
* When victim survivors are safe and supported at work, they are more likely to benefit from its structure and security and renew their work commitments and relationships, which can be an anchor in unstable times.

# Supporting staff to disclose

To support staff in disclosing when they are experiencing family violence, your service should be a safe environment where they feel welcome, and where their cultural safety, identity and characteristics, and confidentiality are respected. A safe workplace has appropriate family violence policies and procedures for staff – as victim survivors and as people who use violence. To be effective, these policies and procedures should be:

* developed in consultation with employees and health and safety representatives
* be available and communicated to all employees
* included in induction programs and discussed at team meetings
* be reviewed regularly.

For more information see [***Support for staff impacted by family violence: Guide for health services on policy development***](https://health.vic.gov.au/health-workforce/family-violence-support) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/health-workforce/family-violence-support>.

# Responding to a staff disclosure

When staff indicate that they would like to disclose their experience of family violence, it is important to prepare for the conversation, so they feel safe and comfortable, and so you can validate their disclosure and experience. Advice on how to respond is summarised in a [**lanyard card**](https://health.vic.gov.au/health-workforce/family-violence-support) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/health-workforce/family-violence-support> that you can carry with you.

## Preparing for the conversation

If a staff member would like to discuss their experience of family violence:

* **Ask what they need to feel comfortable –** The staff member should feel that they can have the conversation in a physically and psychologically safe environment.[[11]](#footnote-12) For example, they may wish to be accompanied by an advocate or a support person who is not the person using violence.
* **Address communication or childcare barriers –** If relevant, ask if the staff member would like an accredited interpreter or any accessibility adjustments. If needed, arrange care for children or young people so that the meeting can occur.
* **Offer alternatives with whom they can discuss their situation –** This could include family violence contact officer(s), the Human Resources team or chief executive, as per your health service’s procedures and Enterprise Bargaining Agreement.
* **Find a safe, welcoming, and private space to have the conversation –** The space should not be near clients or workers, and you should ideally meet when the staff member is not under pressure or seeing clients. The space should also have physical cues, such as signs or flags, showing that victim survivors, their culture, characteristics, and identities will be respected.
* **Explain you will respect their privacy and needs, and their wellbeing is a priority –** Let the staff member know they can take a break at any time. Remind them of this regularly, and schedule breaks if needed.
* **If there are safety issues, let security or suitable personnel know, provided this still respects staff privacy –** By advisingsecurity or suitable personnel that you are having a meeting on family violence, they can help prevent the person using violence from entering and/or relocate the victim survivor to a safer environment.

If there is an **immediate threat or risk** to the staff member experiencing family violence, call police on Triple Zero (000). Take any safe, necessary actions and address immediate safety risk or health needs first.[[12]](#footnote-13) See the support services below for more information.

### Support services

* Safe Steps (24/7 family violence response): 1800 015 188
* 1800RESPECT (sexual assault and family violence helpline): 1800 737 732
* Men’s Referral Service: 1300 766 491
* Relationships Australia: 1300 364 277
* Rainbow Door (LGBTQIA+): 1800 729 367
* Djirra (Aboriginal service): 1800 105 303
* Dardi Munwurro Aboriginal Men Support Service (24 hours): 1800 435 799
* inTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence: 1800 755 988
* The Orange Door: <https://orangedoor.vic.gov.au/contact>
* Sexual Assault Crisis Line (after hours service): 1800 806 292
* Your service’s EAP

## Validating a victim survivor’s disclosure

Validation is essential to supporting the victim survivor, their agency and self-determination, and understanding how they are impacted by family violence. Validating a victim survivor’s experience can help heal any trauma or shame they may feel and counter any silencing and blame-shifting they may have experienced from others.

If a staff member discloses that they are experiencing or affected by family violence, validate this by:

* being calm, accepting, non-judgmental and encouraging of their disclosure
* listening without providing ‘advice’ or options yet
* believing their story/experience/perception
* monitoring your own response.

If your response is defensive, and if you blame or accuse the staff member, they will likely not consider you a safe person with whom they can discuss private and sensitive information.

Key messages you can use to help validate the staff member’s account include:

* “It’s not your fault; it is family violence. The person using violence is responsible.”
* “Family violence is **never** okay. It is unlawful and a major issue.”
* “I can provide you with information on the support available.”
* “We care about your health and safety and respect your privacy.”
* “We respect you as an individual and value you as an employee.”
* “We understand the impact of family violence and can help you manage its impact on you and your work.”
* “Our health service has strategies and options to help keep you safe and well, such as policies to address family violence and prevent discrimination against victim survivors.”

# Supporting staff after a disclosure

If there is **immediate danger** to the staff member experiencing family violence:

* call police on Triple Zero (000) and take any safe, necessary actions
* address immediate safety risk or health needs first
* follow your workplace policies and procedures.

If the staff member experiencing family violence is **not in immediate danger** and **would like further assistance**, support could include:

* providing information about current family violence support services available (see [Support services](#_Support_services_1))
* referring the staff member for risk assessment, in consultation with a specialist family violence worker
* helping the employee to create a workplace support or safety plan (see [Appendix 1](#_Appendix_1_:) for a sample)
* implementing reasonable changes in the workplace to increase safety, such as those in a workplace support or safety plan (see [Reasonable adjustments](#_Reasonable_adjustments) for examples)
* providing information and support to the staff member on how to access leave
* supporting the staff member to access your organisation’s EAP, letting them know that in some cases there are family violence specialists in the program, or an equivalent service that offers mentoring and debriefing.

## Reasonable adjustments

Reasonable adjustments may include:

* amendments to working hours or environment (e.g. asking what the staff member needs to feel comfortable, removing potential weapons, and addressing access and transition points in safety planning)
* changes to contact numbers and/or email addresses
* extra support, coaching or other adjustments to accommodate situations impacted by abuse, such as interviews
* other measures identified by the staff member, their support agencies or the organisation.

Your health service may have support mechanisms such as a peer support program or EAP, but only the victim survivor can decide which supports best suit them. For example, a peer support program is only a first point of contact option, does not offer lived experience, and is not a family violence or community service.

## Other roles

Your family violence representatives, contact officers or health and safety representatives can:

* inform the staff member of entitlements and approve family violence leave
* implement the process for family violence support
* inform the staff member’s direct line manager and Human Resources of family violence leave approvals
* if the staff member consents, inform their direct line manager of the situation
* complete a workplace safety plan documenting all contact with the staff member.[[13]](#footnote-14)

# Supporting a staff member’s safety planning

Where an employee has disclosed that they have experienced family violence, or where there are specific risks of family violence, you should support the victim survivor’s safety plan. You should develop appropriate risk controls for the health service, including safety planning for any other employees who are affected, or at risk from a person using violence.

WorkSafe suggests control measures that may help prevent family violence incidents in workplaces include:

* Ensuring visitors are clearly identified to avoid accidentally allowing a person known to use family violence to enter the workplace.
* Developing and putting in place a policy that states your organisation will take steps to protect employees from violence, including family violence, in the workplace.
* Ensuring communication and duress alarm systems’ call screening procedures are in place.
* Ensuring the building or workplace is secure and entry is controlled, for example through swipe card or pin code access. Where possible, separating employees from the public.[[14]](#footnote-15)

# Support for managers

If this topic raises issues for you and you would like to discuss it, please contact your health service’s EAP, 1800RESPECT (sexual assault and family violence helpline) on 1800 737 732, or see [Support services](#_Support_services_1) above.

# Training and resources for managers

Frontline hospital staff are uniquely placed to identify and provide early support to victim survivors of family violence who use their service. The **Strengthening Hospital Responses to Family Violence (SHRFV)** initiative ensures staff have the skills and experience to play a central role in reducing the impact of family violence. SHRFV is led by the Royal Women’s Hospital and Bendigo Health and builds the capacity and capability of Victorian public health services to deliver a whole-of-hospital response to family violence.

You can access the SHRFV workplace program resources on [The Royal Women’s Hospital website](https://www.thewomens.org.au/health-professionals/clinical-resources/strengthening-hospitals-response-to-family-violence/family-violence-workplace-support-program-resources) <https://www.thewomens.org.au/health-professionals/clinical-resources/strengthening-hospitals-response-to-family-violence/family-violence-workplace-support-program-resources>.

**MARAM Leading Alignment training** is available for organisational leaders who have decision making responsibilities to embed MARAM within the organisation’s context. The training promotes an understanding of the MARAM framework, including key strategies and requirements such as practice, policies and procedures necessary to align with MARAM.

[Access further information and course enrolment.](https://safeandequal.org.au/training-events/maram-courses/) <https://safeandequal.org.au/training-events/maram-courses>

[See a summary of MARAM training for health workforces.](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/health-workforce/family-violence-multi-agency-risk-assessment-and-management-framework#maram-training)<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/health-workforce/family-violence-multi-agency-risk-assessment-and-management-framework#maram-training>

# MARAM resources for organisations

**MARAM guidance and resources** to assist organisations and workers in implementing MARAM and upskilling in family violence knowledge and practice are available on the [MARAM practice guides and resources website](https://www.vic.gov.au/maram-practice-guides-and-resources) <https://www.vic.gov.au/maram-practice-guides-and-resources>.

The **MARAM Organisational embedding guide** and supporting resources can also be found on the [MARAM practice guides and resources website](https://www.vic.gov.au/maram-practice-guides-and-resources) <https://www.vic.gov.au/maram-practice-guides-and-resources> under ‘Organisational focused resources’.

# Further information

For further information about training and resources available to support health workforces to implement family violence reforms, email [infosharing@health.vic.gov.au](mailto:infosharing@health.vic.gov.au)

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# Appendix 1: Workplace safety plan template

Workplace safety plans should be completed by an appropriately trained manager or HR and the employee.

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| This workplace safety plan template provides questions to work through with an employee.  Every workplace safety plan is unique and based on the needs of the employee – you should be guided by them on what is important and safe for them in their workplace safety plan.  Under each checklist question with a ‘yes’, ‘no’, or ‘N/A’ response option, you can provide additional details about your conversation.  Add space to each section to write in further details, as required. |

## Employee details

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Name, position and usual place of work: |  |
| Employment status: (full-time, part-time, casual) |  |
| Eligible for family violence leave: (Y/N) |  |

## Emergency contacts

*Are the emergency contact details on the system up to date? Is there an alternative emergency contact person?*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Emergency contact: |  |
| Telephone number: |  |
| Relationship to employee: |  |
| Time at which the emergency contact will be called if the person is not at work and has not made contact: |  |
| Employee has confirmed their agreement with process (Y/N) |  |
| Time at which a welfare check will be sought via Triple Zero (000) if no response is received: |  |

Call **000** in an emergency or Safe Steps on **1800 015 188** or **local family violence organisation** on:

|  |
| --- |
| *Insert contact details for local service here* |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Question** | | | **Yes** | | **No** | | **Comments (or not known)** | |
| Has anyone in your family done something that made you or your children feel unsafe or afraid? | | |  | |  | |  | |
| Is there more than one person in your family that is making you or your children feel unsafe or afraid? (Are there multiple people using violence) | | |  | |  | |  | |
| *The following risk related questions refer to the person using violence:* | | | | | | | | |
| **actions by person using violence** | *Have they…* | | | | | | | |
|  | controlled your day-to-day activities (e.g. who you see, where you go) or put you down? *(this may indicate than increased risk of the victim being killed or almost killed)* | |  | |  | |  | |
|  | threatened to hurt you in any way? | |  | |  | |  | |
|  | physically hurt you in any way (hit, slapped, kicked or otherwise physically hurt you)? | |  | |  | |  | |
| **SELF-ASSESSMENT** | Do you have any immediate concerns about the safety of your children or someone else in your family? | |  | |  | |  | |
| Do you feel safe when you leave here today? | |  | |  | |  | |
| Would you engage with a trusted person or police if you felt unsafe or in danger? | |  | |  | |  | |

## Family violence leave

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Does the person wish to apply for family violence leave? (Y/N/NA – provide details) |  |
| Has evidence been provided of family violence in accordance with the organisation’s policy? (Y/N/NA – provide details) |  |
| Does the employee understand that HR will be informed of relevant family violence information in order to process the leave request? (Y/N/NA – provide details) |  |

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## System intervention

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Is there a family violence intervention order (FVIO) or similar? (Y/N/NA – if yes, request a copy of the order or relevant details that affect the workplace) |  |
| Is the employee listed as the affected family member (AFM) or the person using violence (PUV)? (AFM/PUV – provide details) |  |
| Does the employee understand that HR will be informed of relevant family violence information in order to process the leave request? (Y/N/NA – provide details) |  |

## Details of the person using violence

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Does the person using violence work for the same organisation or have links to the workplace? (Y/N) |  |
| If yes, provide details. Note: seek advice from HR/legal department. |  |

## Specialist advice

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Has the employee engaged with a specialist family violence or other service? (Y/N/NA – provide details) |  |
| Has the employee been provided with the referral’s information and details of any workplace support programs? (Y/N/NA – provide details) |  |
| Has the employee been informed of the limits of confidentiality? (Y/N/NA – provide details) |  |

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## Workplace duties and safety

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Are there any workplace duties that need to be modified (this can be for safety reasons or health and wellbeing more generally) (Y/N/NA – provide details) |  |
| Are flexible working arrangements required? (i.e. different start/finish times, working away from public areas, having phone diverted?) (Y/N/NA – provide details) |  |
| Is the employee safe from entering and exiting the place of work? Is there a need to inform security or make security arrangements? (Can security be given a photograph of the person who uses violence? Can the employee be given access to a workplace car park? Does their work car need to be changed?) (Y/N/NA – provide details) |  |
| Is any harassment taking place at work requiring changes to telephone numbers, email addresses, etc.? (Does reception need to be informed? Does information need to be removed from a public-facing website? Can IT services block emails from the person using violence? (Y/N/NA – provide details) |  |
| Do any bank payment details need changing to prevent financial abuse? (Y/N/NA – provide details) |  |

## Action plan and next steps

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Risk/concern** | **Strategy** | **Workplace action** | **Employee action** | **Date of review** |
| *e.g. Financial abuse* | *Change bank payment details* | *Change details on system* | *Provide new bank details* | *XXX* |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |

**Consent to collect and handle personal information**

1. I consent to my employer collecting and handling my personal information under this plan
2. I understand my personal information will be marked ‘Official: sensitive’ and kept secure by my employer
3. I also understand that my manager may have to inform another manager or HR about my situation for their own accountability and support
4. I also understand the organisation has reporting obligations, as described below.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Employee’s name: |  |
| Employee’s signature: |  |
| Manager’s name: |  |
| Manager’s signature: |  |
| Date: |  |
| Verbal consent obtained: (Y/N) |  |
| Organisation’s reporting obligations: |  |

## Preferred contact method

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Mail: |  |
| Email: |  |
| Phone/text: |  |
| Would you prefer to be called from a private number?: (Y/N) |  |
| What is the best day and time for us to call? |  |
| A message left with a safe/authorised person? |  |
| Authorised person contact details: (full name, relationship, telephone) |  |

Another example of a Workplace Safety Plan is outlined in the [Strengthening Hospital Responses to Family Violence resources](https://www.thewomens.org.au/health-professionals/clinical-resources/strengthening-hospitals-response-to-family-violence/family-violence-workplace-support-program-resources) <https://www.thewomens.org.au/health-professionals/clinical-resources/strengthening-hospitals-response-to-family-violence/family-violence-workplace-support-program-resources>.

1. Family Violence Protection Act 2008 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. MARAM Foundation Knowledge Guide: <https://www.vic.gov.au/maram-practice-guides-foundation-knowledge-guide>, S 12.2.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. WorkSafe, Addressing family violence in the workplace: <https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/addressing-family-violence-workplace> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Ludo McFerran, ‘Safe at Home, Safe at Work? National Domestic Violence and the Workplace Survey, 2011, p 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. For more information, see MARAM Knowledge Foundation Guide, Section 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. State of Victoria, Australia, Family Safety Victoria, MARAM Alignment Organisation Self-Audit Tool, June 2020, pp 15-20, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Royal Commission into Family Violence Volume VI The Workplace, pp 71, 73. MARAM p 144, Table 3: Protective factors for adults and children [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. See Royal Commission into Family Violence, p 72: The effects of family violence on employment [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Victoria, WorkSafe, Addressing family violence in the workplace: <https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/addressing-family-violence-workplace> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Victoria, WorkSafe, <https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/addressing-family-violence-workplace> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. MARAM Foundation Knowledge Guide p 7, Section 1.6 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Ibid. p 73-80. Also see Section 1.4, 1.7 and the Foundation Knowledge Guide [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. See Victoria, WorkSafe, Information sheet: Addressing family violence in the workplace: <https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/addressing-family-violence-workplace> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. For more see: Victoria, WorkSafe, <https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/addressing-family-violence-workplace>. Safe Work Australia <https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-01/family\_and\_domestic\_violence\_information\_sheet.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)