

**Domestic abuse.
It's all our business.**



Hidden in Plain Sight: Case Study

This case study was written as an article for Tomorrow's Cleaning, by EIDA Ambassador Fiona Bowman.

The employee: Sarah

Can you imagine being a Domestic Abuse victim and having to hide your bruises? Hiding the marks that he makes on my neck by wearing a polo neck, when he tries to strangle me, so that I can go to work? Try to imagine how I try to hide the fact that he calls me disgusting names and accuses me of having affairs with my work colleagues? I'm too scared to wear nice clothes. I'm scared to wear make-up. I'm scared to be a minute late because he will be asking where I've been. So, when I am at work, I am in a state of constant nerves. Never knowing when I will get the next abusive phone call or text or if he will actually turn up, as he often threatens to do, and cause a row with one of my male colleagues. I can't live normally. I can't go to nights out or social events because the abuse and the verbal or physical battering I will get when I get home isn't worth it. Better to try to keep the peace.

And slowly he has alienated me from friends, work colleagues, family. He has isolated me and has convinced me that the best person in my life is him. "You don't need those others. They just upset you."

Abusers have so many forms of control. Financial control, preventing me from having any money for myself. Taking my wages on payday. Preventing me from having an escape plan.... Because he tells me, time and time again that no-one else would have me. I am so useless and I am such a waste of space and he says that if he can't have me, no-one else can....and if I try to escape, then he will track me down and he will kill me. Because he owns me mind, body and soul. And the embarrassment of allowing myself to be abused, the shame of allowing myself to get to this awful place, prevents me from telling anyone. You cannot know what it is like to be his punchbag. And because I am so undermined, I have ceased to believe that there is any way out. I have stopped believing that there is any other life except for this hell that I exist in. And sometimes he will be wonderful and affectionate and caring and I think.... maybe this time, maybe things are going to change. But each time, it gets worse. Each beating more furious and more damaging. As though he is testing his power, as though he is pushing his boundaries further and further. And it is so exhausting. The mind-games and the violence. And he has convinced me that it's my fault. "You're the only person who makes me angry like this!!"

One of the Supervisors at work asked me if everything is ok at home, but I can't tell her what's happening. I am too ashamed. I just keep my head down and work hard. I don't want to lose my job. Being at work is a relief and being away from home and my abuser, gives me the chance to be "normal". I saw a number on the back of the toilet door for a National Domestic Abuse Helpline – 0808 2000 247 Maybe I will can ring them and see how they can help me?

The employer:

I'm sure there's something happening with Sarah. She came in last week, when it was really hot and she was wearing a polo neck. I asked her if she was hot and if she wanted a polo shirt, but she refused and looked upset. She works hard, her Supervisor says that she will do more than she is expected to do, but she doesn't talk about home much. She is always getting texts on her phone and sometimes she will have to go outside to take a call. It's clear that someone is having a

go at her, but she tries to pretend that everything is ok and goes straight back to work. Her boyfriend turned up and waited for her the other day, outside the client's offices where she works as a Cleaning Operative. He often hangs around and she tries to get finished work quickly and goes straight out. He often looks like he is giving her a hard time if she is a few minutes late.

We had a staff social two weeks ago, but she didn't come. Said that she didn't feel very well. And she doesn't seem to be in contact with her family. I know she has a sister and her Mum lives in the next town, but I don't think she sees them much.

Sarah came to us and asked if her wages could be paid into her boyfriend's account because he said that he needs to pay the bills, but we said that wasn't possible. She seemed very agitated and I asked her if she was all right. She said she was, but then I saw her later and she had been crying. I know she doesn't have a lot of money and she always brings herself a sandwich rather than eating in the Client Café with the others. I'm not sure how to help?

What can an employer do if they suspect their employee is in an abusive relationship?

Changing the culture of your organisation is important, so that people feel able to speak out if they are being abused or if a colleague or family member needs assistance. Managers don't need to be the expert; they just need to know how to signpost a staff member to the professional help that is out there.

Companies need to put in place Domestic Abuse Policies and procedures in order that they can help any of their employees, male or female, who may be victims of Domestic Abuse. Rolling our awareness sessions across the business can also be really beneficial.

You can train Domestic Abuse Champions, in the same way that you might have First Aiders or Mental Health First Aiders in the business. The Senior Management Team need to be on board with this and HR need to have training in order that they can deal with any difficult issues that may arise.

Victims will be assaulted more than 35 times before they call for help from police or services so don't be surprised if it takes a person some time to ask for help. But getting the message out to your staff that there is confidential assistance available can give them a sense of hope and when they do reach out to you, you need to do everything at their speed, unless there is imminent danger to the person or your other staff, in which case you must call 999.

There are organisations who can help you put policies in place and train your staff. Look on www.Alphavesta.com for some guidance on what you can do for your business.

And if you want to find out what other businesses have been doing and to share their best practice, your business can join EIDA free of charge – Employers Initiative on Domestic Abuse www.eida.org.uk