

# Occupational violence and aggression post-incident support

A guide for  
health service leaders



## What is it?

Occupational violence and aggression (OVA) involves incidents in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work.

Examples of OVA include, but are not limited to:

- biting, spitting, scratching, hitting, kicking
- pushing, shoving, tripping, grabbing
- throwing objects, damaging property
- verbal abuse and threats
- using or threatening to use a weapon
- sexual harassment or assault.



## **Who is this guide for?**

This guide is intended for senior leaders working in Victorian healthcare settings who have responsibility for the health and safety of other staff. Senior leaders may include directors, senior executives (including Chief Executive Officers and heads of departments), and board members.

# Post-incident responsibilities of organisations

**As far as is reasonably practicable, employers must ensure that they provide and maintain a safe and healthy work environment.**

In fulfilling the employer's role, senior leaders in the organisation need to consult with employees and health and safety representatives when identifying and assessing hazards or risks to health or safety in the workplace. They also need to provide guidance, information, training and supports to enable staff to perform their work in a safe manner. In addition to strategies aimed at prevention and management of OVA, clear policies and procedures should define post-incident responsibilities for senior leaders, managers and staff members.

Leaders, managers and staff working in health services are expected to treat all reports of OVA seriously. Senior leaders should demonstrate a commitment to promoting a culture where OVA is not accepted as 'part of the job'.

The immediate priority is to make sure that everyone is safe and they receive any medical attention that they need. However, following an incident, there are further actions that are required to ensure that appropriate support is provided to staff and follow-up actions are undertaken to improve organisational responses to, and prevention of, OVA. This includes incident reporting and investigation.



### **As a senior leader your responsibilities following an incident of OVA include:**

- ensuring that policy and procedures designed to protect the health and safety of all persons affected by OVA are followed as part of the immediate response
- providing guidance on the implementation of policy and procedures to managers, for example, determining whether an incident needs to be reported to the police and/or WorkSafe Victoria
- supporting managers and staff by listening to and hearing about the issues, including offering timely support in a respectful and thoughtful manner
- encouraging an open reporting process, taking action on these reports, and ensuring consultation and communication to staff about these issues and subsequent actions
- ensuring that all incidents are investigated, risk control measures are reviewed, and actions for improvement are implemented
- reviewing data on OVA incidents, identifying any trends and taking appropriate action to prevent future occurrences.

## **Organisational benefits of effective management of OVA**

While employers have a legal responsibility to ensure the safety of their staff at work, the active involvement and commitment of senior leaders to the psychological and physical safety and wellbeing of staff brings broader benefits to the organisation. They include:

- increased employee job satisfaction and engagement
- improved work practices and productivity
- reduced exposure and harm due to OVA
- reduced work-related sick leave and WorkCover claims
- optimised staff wellbeing, which can contribute to quality patient care.

# Post-incident responsibilities of managers

## **When notified of an incident of OVA, a manager should ensure that:**

- everyone involved in the incident is safe
- medical attention is provided when necessary
- immediate emotional and practical support is provided to staff and others who have experienced or have been exposed to the incident
- accurate details about the incident are obtained from a reliable source to assist with coordinating a response
- an incident report is completed by the staff member involved. It may be necessary to provide the staff member with assistance, or complete the report on their behalf, where physical or psychological issues are present.

**Please refer to the following guide in this series for further information:**

**Occupational violence and aggression post-incident support:  
A guide for managers**

## **A manager also has a responsibility to ensure that:**

- ongoing practical and emotional support is provided to affected staff along with assistance to engage with support services, if required – the principles of psychological first aid may be a helpful starting point
- an investigation of the incident is undertaken, existing controls and risk management processes are reviewed and new controls are implemented
- the incident is reported in line with local protocols (for example, to senior manager and local health and safety representative)
- leave, alterations, arrangements and information about return to work is provided if relevant
- information about making a WorkCover claim is provided, where relevant
- staff are supported to report the matter to police, and if necessary with any subsequent legal processes (for example, giving evidence in court)
- records of incidents are maintained, trends are analysed, and appropriate interventions and feedback to staff are provided.

# Post-incident responsibilities of staff

**To assist with effective post-incident response and support, each staff member has a responsibility to:**

- comply with local policies and procedures for managing and responding to incidents of OVA
- report any incident of OVA in accordance with local protocols
- be aware of available sources of information and support, and relevant education and training
- take reasonable care of their own health and safety at work, including the health and safety of others who may be affected by their actions
- communicate their concerns to their manager, senior leader or another trusted senior staff member. They may also wish to raise any occupational health and safety concerns with their OHS representative.

**Please refer to the following guide in this series for further information:**

**Occupational violence and aggression post-incident support:  
A guide for staff**



# Common reactions

**Immediately after experiencing an incident of OVA, some people will experience psychological and physiological reactions that can be quite intense and distressing.**

Typically these are relatively short-term reactions to a very stressful situation. it is important to remember that most people will recover after exposure to OVA, and often with the practical and emotional support from others. For some staff, OVA can have a more significant impact on their psychological wellbeing.

These reactions can vary in severity depending on a range of risk factors, which may be organisational, operational, environmental, or individual.

Organisational	Operational	Environmental	Individual
inadequate support from management	inadequate risk management processes	higher level of exposure to OVA	pre-existing health and mental health issues
poor communication within team and between levels of management	inadequate or inconsistent OVA response procedures	more severe threats	prior exposure to incidents of OVA or other psychological trauma
low management responsiveness to capabilities and needs of staff			the extent to which a person is dealing with other stressful experiences in their life



**These reactions can be quite strong and are often more pronounced in the initial few weeks. In most cases, they will diminish in the weeks following the incident. Some people may experience such reactions for a longer period.**

**Common reactions can include the following**

---

**Feelings**

- irritable or 'on edge'
  - fearful, sad or angry
  - overwhelmed
  - hopelessness or worthlessness
- 

**Thoughts**

- difficulty with attention and concentration
  - difficulty making plans
  - worrying more than the person usually does
  - unwanted memories or bad dreams related to the event
  - constant questioning such as 'What if others or I had done something different?' and 'What will happen now?'
- 

**Behaviours**

- sleep problems
  - feeling detached or withdrawn from others
  - loss of sense of purpose at work
  - reduced productivity
  - increased use of medication, alcohol, or illicit substances
- 

**Reactions to OVA can be mitigated to some extent by protective factors including:**

- a positive and supportive working environment
- early and ready access to support and treatment
- consistent and effective OVA response policies and procedures in place
- healthy work/life balance and staff self-care.



## Potential impacts and recovery

**Psychological reactions are typically short term and diminish in the weeks following an incident of OVA, although some people may experience them from time to time for a longer period. Structured psychological interventions are usually not recommended in the first few weeks following an incident.**

For some managers and staff, the experience of OVA may have a more significant or enduring impact on their psychological wellbeing. Some people may develop a mental health problem such as depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, excessive use of alcohol or other substances.

As a general rule, you should encourage a person to seek professional help if they (or others) think that they are having difficulty recovering or would benefit from speaking to a health professional.

### **Some signs that a person may need to speak to a professional include:**

- the person doesn't seem to be their 'usual self'
- their problems seem quite severe
- their emotional reactions are not improving
- it is difficult for the person to undertake day-to-day work or other activities
- it is difficult for the person to get along with others, such as colleagues, parents, family or friends.

**It's important to remember that effective psychological and medical treatments are available to help people recover from the mental health impacts of OVA.**



## How can senior leaders improve post-incident support provided to staff?

**Senior leaders have an important role to play in positively influencing an organisational culture that values and attends to the psychological and physical safety and wellbeing of all staff.**

Senior leaders need to ensure that the mental wellbeing of managers and staff, including the prevention and management of OVA is a strategic priority for their organisation. It is important that senior leaders recognise that providing post-incident support is a key part of managers' roles, and that they support managers to do this effectively (for example, by assisting them with training).

Following an incident of OVA, senior leaders can have a meaningful impact on the recovery of staff by assisting managers to ensure peer and professional supports provide appropriate care and support to people during times of increased stress.

Senior leaders also need to ensure that follow-up actions are taken in order to improve their organisation's responses to, and prevention of, OVA.

In addition, senior leaders can communicate to managers and staff that their safety and wellbeing is the priority and encourage them to seek assistance if required.

## Further information and advice

Your peers and colleagues

Your health service's human resources department

Your health service's occupational health and safety committee

Your local Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

Unions and professional associations

### WorkSafe Victoria

- *Prevention and management of violence and aggression in health services:*  
[www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/210993/ISBN-Prevention-and-management-of-violence-and-aggression-health-services-2017-06.pdf](http://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/210993/ISBN-Prevention-and-management-of-violence-and-aggression-health-services-2017-06.pdf)
- 'It's Never OK' Campaign:  
[www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/campaigns/itsneverok](http://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/campaigns/itsneverok)
- WorkSafe Victoria Advisory Service:  
call: 1800 136 089 or (03) 9641 1444  
email: [info@worksafe.vic.gov.au](mailto:info@worksafe.vic.gov.au)

### Department of Health and Human Services

- Tools and resources including the *Framework for preventing and managing occupational violence and aggression* and the *Guide for violence and aggression training in Victorian health services* can be found on the Department of Health and Human Services website:  
[www2.health.vic.gov.au/health-workforce/worker-health-wellbeing](http://www2.health.vic.gov.au/health-workforce/worker-health-wellbeing)

### Phoenix Australia – Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health:

[www.phoenixaustralia.org](http://www.phoenixaustralia.org)

### beyondblue

[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

- *Developing a workplace mental health strategy:*  
*A how-to guide for health services:*  
[www.headsup.org.au/healthy-workplaces/information-for-health-services](http://www.headsup.org.au/healthy-workplaces/information-for-health-services)



# Things to remember

After reading this guide, you may find it useful to write down some strategies you would like to remember

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---





**To receive this publication in an accessible format  
email Worker Health and Wellbeing <[whwb@dhhs.vic.gov.au](mailto:whwb@dhhs.vic.gov.au)>**

This booklet was developed by Phoenix Australia – Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health in partnership with the Department of Health and Human Services.

Authorised and published by the Victorian Government, 1 Treasury Place, Melbourne.

© State of Victoria, Department of Health and Human Services April, 2018.

Except where otherwise indicated, the images in this publication show models and illustrative settings only, and do not necessarily depict actual services, facilities or recipients of services. This publication may contain images of deceased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

ISBN 978-1-76069-367-1 (Print)

ISBN 978-1-76069-368-8 (pdf/online)

Available at Occupational Violence Aggression <<https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/health-workforce/worker-health-wellbeing/occupational-violence-aggression>>

Print managed by Finsbury Green.

(Design Job Number 1802027)

