



1. *Open Palm*



2. *Tuck Thumb*



3. *Trap Thumb*

THE SIGNAL FOR HELP RESPONDER WORKPLACE GUIDE



CANADIAN
WOMEN'S
FOUNDATION

FONDATION
CANADIENNE
DES FEMMES

This guide gives you basic information on how to support someone at work dealing with gender-based violence. It also gives tips on how you can build a safer and better workplace for anyone dealing with abuse.

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What is the Signal for Help?



1. Open Palm



2. Tuck Thumb



3. Trap Thumb

The Signal for Help is a simple one-handed gesture you can use to silently show you need help and want someone to check in with you in a safe way. It might be useful in a video call. It is a tool that can help some people, some of the time. Every situation is different.

- ▶ ***This video shows an example of how the Signal for Help could be used.***



What Do I Do if I See Somebody Use the Signal for Help?

Reach out to them safely to find out what they need. They may ask you to listen and be there for them. They may ask for help finding services. They may want you to call someone to help them. Let the person using the Signal take the lead.

The Signal for Help signifies “reach out to me safely.”

The person using it may want you to call an emergency service, but do not assume that is what they want or need in the moment. Reach out to them and let them take the lead.

If you see someone using the Signal for Help in public or out of a window or door, calling 911 or emergency services is an appropriate response.



How Can I Reach Out Safely?

1

Call them personally and start by asking them if they are alone.

Examples:

“Is this a good time to talk?”

“Is anyone home?”

“Should I call back later?”

Be ready to respond if you think they might not be safe to talk right then. Example: “Someone is trying to get through to me. I need to call you back.”



How Can I Reach Out Safely?

2

Ask questions that can be answered with a “yes” or “no”.

Examples:

“Would you like me to call a shelter or service on your behalf?”

“Do you need our employee assistance program number?”

“Should I look for services that might help you and call you back?”

“Would you like me to call 911?”



How Can I Reach Out Safely?

3

Send a text, WhatsApp message, or email message, and ask general questions

Examples:

“How are you doing?”

“Get in touch when you can and I’ll book a meeting.”

People in violent homes and relationships may be closely monitored. The person abusing them may watch where they go, who they call or text, what they do on social media, and more. These options can help you find out what’s wrong in a safer way.



[*Learn more about the Signal for Help.*](#)



What's a Workplace's Role to Address Gender-Based Violence?

Employers have a duty to ensure all employees have a safe and healthy workplace, and this includes protecting employees from various forms of violence. Some regions, such as Ontario and Manitoba, specifically name domestic and family violence in their occupational health and safety legislation¹.

53.5
%

And many kinds of gender-based violence can happen at work. For example, a national workplace survey found that **53.5% of respondents who reported facing domestic violence said that at least one type of abuse occurred at or near the workplace.** Amongst many negative impacts, people who faced abuse said it harmed their ability to work. And coworkers were affected too, as they were concerned for the well-being of their coworker being hurt².

¹ Canadian Centre for Occupational Health & Safety.

² The Centre for Research & Education on Violence against Women & Children at Western University and Canadian Labour Congress, 2014



What's a Workplace's Role in Addressing Gender-Based Violence?

\$ 77.9M

It's estimated that **employers lose \$77.9 million annually due to direct and indirect impacts of domestic violence³.**

When workplaces get proactive and intentional about preventing and ending gender-based violence, many benefits result. The effort builds better work culture, improves employee trust and productivity, helps leaders take on a stronger supportive mentoring stance, and helps workplaces better meet their gender equity and safety goals⁴. To be effective, changes need to happen on a structural level in areas such as human resource policies and practices, commitments from leadership, employee training, and strategic planning.

³ Zhang et al., Department of Justice Canada, 2013

⁴ Kahui et al., 2014



How Can I Support a Coworker Facing Abuse?

In a national workplace survey, 35.4% of respondents reported knowing at least one co-worker who they believe experienced domestic abuse⁵.

Gender-based violence can be experienced differently by different people, and a person may not seem like they are being abused to you. They may not use the Signal for Help to communicate, but they still need to know you will help them feel cared for, supported, and unashamed if they decide to tell you what they are going through.



Remember that abuse is common.

Many people experience it, and many people perpetrate it. But abuse is not inevitable. People do it to other people, and they can stop. We all have to play a part in ending it.



Gender-based violence can happen at work.

It can happen between coworkers and workers and customers. It can happen at home and affect the person being abused as they try to work. Risk of abuse can also spill into the workplace (e.g. abuser comes to work). In a work-from-at-home situation where work and homelife blend into each other, abuse can play out in unique ways.

5 The Centre for Research & Education on Violence against Women & Children at Western University and Canadian Labour Congress, 2014



How Can I Support a Coworker Facing Abuse?



Be proactive.

Find ways to demonstrate your compassion toward your coworkers going through abuse. Let them know that if they are going through anything difficult, you will be there to support them.



Learn about relevant resources and services.

You can start with the community-based services on page 17. What does your workplace offer? An employee assistance program? Helpful human resources? Learn what's relevant and available to an employee dealing with abuse.



If someone tells you that they are experiencing abuse, here's how you can support:

- **Focus on the person being hurt.**

Your job is to support them. Make sure you are not putting your anger, shock, sadness, or fear first in the conversation.

- **Everyone copes with abuse differently.**

They may do things differently than you. That is okay. Be there to support them as they explore what works for them.

- **Listen and let them lead.**

Instead of telling them what you would do or what they should do, ask them how you can best support them.

- **Be judgment-free.**

Instead of saying “What did you do?”, “How did you make them mad?”, “Why don’t you leave?” or “You chose this relationship,” say:

“It’s not your fault.”

“I’m here for you.”

“How are you doing right now?”



If someone tells you that they are experiencing abuse, here's how you can support:

- **Be patient and open-minded.**

Abusive relationships are complicated, scary, confusing, and traumatic. Figuring things out takes time. You may need to have more conversations with this person. Don't push. There is no one right answer, no quick fix, and everyone deals with these things differently.

- **Participate in workplace violence prevention and intervention efforts.** In a leadership position? Part of a union, committee, or human resources department? Hold influence? You can help shape policies, practices, training and orientation, prevention programs, and resources that will help survivors of abuse in your workplace. Learn what is available and what needs to be added or improved. Use whatever level of influence you have to help make your workplace safer.



People don't talk about gender-based violence very often and don't always know how to respond to it.

At work, it may even seem "unprofessional" to talk about it.

People might "blame the victim" and make the person who was hurt feel judged. We can all learn how to respond in better, more helpful ways.

We all have a role to play in ending abuse everywhere.

We can practice being caring, patient, and non-judgmental.



What is gender-based violence?

It is the types of abuse that women, girls, and Two Spirit, trans and non-binary people are at highest risk of experiencing. It can take physical and emotional forms, such as: name-calling, hitting, pushing, blocking, stalking/criminal harassment, rape, sexual assault, control, and manipulation.

Many forms of this abuse are against the law. Workplace legislation and policy best practices say that employers have the responsibility to prevent and address violence and harassment that can happen at work, including many forms of gender-based violence.

It can happen between people in romantic relationships. It can happen in families, at work, and between friends, coworkers, acquaintances and strangers. It often occurs in private places between people who know each other.

Anybody can be abused, no matter their background, identity, or circumstance. But women, girls, and gender-diverse people are at high risk of gender-based violence. Some are at even higher risks, due to the additional discrimination and barriers they face. This includes women with disabilities, Indigenous women, racialized women, trans and non-binary people, and women who are homeless or underhoused. People facing abuse may not have access to services that meet their needs (e.g. people in rural or remote areas).

Everybody deserves to feel safe. Everyone should feel loved and cared for. Violence and abuse are never acceptable.



[Learn more about gender-based violence.](#)



Leaving a violent relationship is not always possible or safe.

If someone is being hurt and wants to leave, there may be reasons they can't or it may take them a long time to do it.

Leaving is not the right path for everyone. If a person facing abuse stays in an abusive situation, you can still play a supportive role for them.



Important Services to Know

If you or someone else is in immediate danger, call 911 or your local emergency number. Many services are open all the time (24 hours a day, 7 days a week) and can provide help in many different languages.

Canada-wide:

- 211: call to find any service in your area
- Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety: 1-800-668-4284
- Kids Help Phone: 1-800-6868 | Text 686868
- Labour Program, Employment and Social Development Canada: 1-800-641-4049
- Public Services Health and Safety Association: 1-877-250-7444
- ShelterSafe.ca: online map that connects you to your local shelter or transition house for help or information
- Trans Lifeline: 877-330-6366

Alberta:

- Family Violence Info Line: 780-310-1818

British Columbia and Yukon:

- VictimLink BC: 1-800-563-0808 | TTY 604-875-0885 | Text 1-800-563-0808

Manitoba:

- Family Violence Help Line: 1-877-977-0007 | TTY 1-888-987-2829

New Brunswick:

- Government of New Brunswick - Women's Equality Branch: www.gnb.ca/supportservices

Newfoundland and Labrador:

- Domestic Violence Help Line: 1-888-709-7090

Nova Scotia:

- Domestic Violence Line: 1-855-225-0220

Northwest Territories:

- YWCA: 1-866-223-7775
- (867) 873-8257 in Yellowknife

Nunavut:

- Baffin Regional Agvvik Society: 867-979-4500
-



Important Services to Know

Ontario:

- Anishnaabe Kwewag Gamig
Northern Ontario First Nations
Crisis Line: 1-800-388-5171
- Assaulted Women's Helpline:
1-866-863-0511 | TTY 1-866-863-7868
Text #SAFE (#7233) on your Bell,
Rogers, or Telus mobile phone
- Fem'aide (Francophone):
1-877-336-2433 | TTY 1-866-860-7082
- Seniors Safety Line: 1-866-299-1011

Prince Edward Island:

- PEI Family Violence Prevention
Services: 1-800-240-9894

Quebec:

- SOS violence conjugale:
1-800-363-9010

Saskatchewan:

- 24-Hour Crisis and Abuse Line:
1-800-214-7083
- Abused Women's Crisis Line:
1-888-338-0880
- North East Crisis Line:
1-800-611-6349 or 1-800-668-6868

Websites:

- [Canadian Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse](#)
- [Draw The Line: Engaging Ontarians in a dialogue about sexual violence](#)
- [Gender-Based Violence Knowledge Centre](#)
- [Make It Our Business: for employers and workplace stakeholders to meet obligations under the Ontario Occupational Health and Safety Act and address workplace domestic violence](#)
- [National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence](#)
- [Neighbours, Friends and Families](#)



Frequently Asked Questions

How did the Signal for Help start?

It was launched by the Canadian Women’s Foundation and our partners in April 2020 in response to an increased risk of gender-based violence and increased use of video calls in the COVID-19 pandemic. The Signal is designed as a tool to address the violence that can happen in intimate partner and family relationships.

Does the Signal for Help mean “call the authorities right away”?

No. It signifies “reach out to me safely.” The person using the Signal may want you to call authorities, but do not assume that is what they want or need. Let them take the lead.

Does the Signal stand for something? What if I see something like it being used and I’m not sure what it means?

The Signal for Help is not meant to represent anything in any sign language. If you see someone using a gesture that looks like the Signal for Help and you are not certain what it means, consider the context in which they are using it. When it is safe to contact them, ask them to clarify if they need your help.

What if an abuser learns about the Signal for Help?

An abuser might learn about the Signal. And people in abusive situations are also often closely monitored and may not feel safe to use it. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for everyone in every situation. The Signal for Help is a tool some people might use, some of the time.

What if someone can’t use the Signal for Help?

Other resources and services may help them. If you suspect someone you know is in danger and cannot use the Signal, you can still safely check-in using the tips above.



Continue your journey: become a Signal for Help Responder at Work

Go to signalresponder.ca/work to join our community of active learners

You will get useful tips and information, you'll get access to training to build your knowledge, and practice your skills, and you'll learn how to make your workplace a safer place for people experiencing abuse.



The Canadian Women's Foundation is Canada's public foundation for gender justice. We support women, girls, and gender-diverse people to move out of violence, out of poverty, and into confidence and leadership



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