

Loss prevention standards

Managing Violence and Aggression During the COVID-19 Pandemic

This document provides practical guidance on
minimising the risk of violent and aggressive
behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic



Managing Violence and Aggression During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Introduction

All businesses have a legal obligation and duty of care to ensure a safe workplace for employees. During the COVID-19 pandemic there have been several examples of violent and aggressive incidents to intimidate workers, such as spitting, threats and then claiming to have COVID-19. Employee groups particularly at risk are those in the healthcare sector ([World Health Organisation](#)), police and private security providers and public facing roles, where services may have been curtailed or experienced unprecedented demand, e.g. supermarkets, see [USDAW Survey: Abuse, threats and assaults against shopworkers](#).



Types of Violence and Aggression

With evidence suggesting that violence and aggression has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, companies need to review how they deal with a range of incidents, including:

- Verbal abuse
- Behaviours such as spitting, gestures, written abuse, malicious damage
- Physical attacks
- Threats
- Cyber bullying
- Bullying and harassment

Conflict, violence, aggressive and challenging behaviour in the workplace can occur in a variety of situations, e.g. between employees; employees and management; employees and customers or service users; or due to increased home working and lockdown conditions during the pandemic, between employees and family members.

There may be a number of causes including workplace and external stressors such as coping with rapid change at home and at work and not coping with the 'new norm'.

How organisations manage the risk and effects of violence and aggression should form part of their risk assessments and 'Covid-Secure' procedures. Remember, nobody is paid to be abused, threatened, assaulted or in extreme cases murdered.

Good Risk Management Practice

Whilst reviewing health and safety policies and procedures in relation to the pandemic, do not forget to include the changed risk profile of violence and aggression. Focus on preventing, anticipating and reducing the risk of violent and aggressive behaviour that may occur. Example triggers might be: the need to socially distance, queuing, the re-opening of pubs and bars, queueing for a restaurant table for perceived excessive periods of time, not being able to pay in cash, products not available due to panic buying and wearing face coverings that may interfere with effective communication (both verbal and non-verbal). Consult and engage with employees to understand their fears and anxieties at this time.

Consider the workplace culture and the potential to affect levels of aggression. Do employees view aggression as inevitable, which may propagate practices that indirectly encourage the continuation of violence and aggression towards them? This may provide a good opportunity to develop a better and safer culture, especially if there is a

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need to recruit for newly created positions in view of the Covid-Secure environment we now work in. Set out from day one of re-opening what are considered acceptable and not acceptable behaviours.

Effective communication between all employees is essential to ensure that messages are clear, customer expectations are well managed and there is no ambiguity, mixed messages or room for misunderstanding. Poor communication is often a significant cause of conflict related incidents. Tips on improving communication include:

- Set clear expectations and boundaries. These should be communicated consistently, concisely and regularly. Set expectations early, i.e. before re-opening after the COVID-19 lockdown and not when the customer turns up at the front door on day one of re-opening.

Media reports when non-essential shops re-opened on 15 June 2020 are an example of poor message management. In many cases employees struggled to maintain social distancing rules due to the numbers that turned up and the high expectations of customers when they arrived (be aware of marketing strategies that may fuel an unexpected surge in numbers)

- Listening skills. Create a culture where people listen to each other and learn. Understand why conflict and aggression arises and how this could be minimised
- Recognise and respect difference. Everyone sees and experiences the world differently. Train employees to recognise this and enable them to have more informed conversations
- Address issues or complaints quickly. Try and understand why customers or employees are becoming frustrated. Ask open questions and aim to seek a resolution that is acceptable to all

Review training and competency needs. Many organisations as part of their Covid-Secure procedures have created new roles such as ‘customer hosts’, with employees now being expected to undertake temperature screening of customers on arrival, as part of their duties. There are also changes to the responsibilities that some employees may have to undertake, such as more rigorous cleaning regimes, new chemicals used, etc. Social distancing measures will require businesses to manage customer flows and numbers going into premises.

External threats such as ‘Vehicle as a Weapon’ (VAW) attacks may become an increased risk. The aim of such attacks is to harm as many people as possible. Increased risk exposure from long queues outside of premises will need to be considered, to address the potential for providing more opportunities for such attacks to occur. For more information on this topic issued by the Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure, [click here](#).

Security provision and the physical working environment should also be reviewed in the context of social distancing and revised services that are in place due to the pandemic. Relevant risk assessments should include:

- Reasonably foreseeable threat scenarios due to the instigation of Covid-Secure measures such as social distance enforcement tensions that may arise
- Frontline employees who may be most at risk of experiencing violence and aggression
- When working in other sites or premises, train employees to undertake dynamic risk assessments when entering, and advise if they feel uncomfortable to make their excuses and leave
- Resources that may be required to mitigate the risks:
 - Defence in depth/layered protection measures such as access control, manned guarding, physical barriers
 - Install panic buttons to alert others of the changing environment
 - Personal safety devices – provide panic alarms and train employees how to use them and to understand their purpose, which is to shock and disorientate an attacker, giving the employee vital seconds to get away. Also, train employees in relaxation techniques so they are in a position to press the button when necessary or use communications devices calmly, e.g. 2-way radios

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- Improve CCTV systems in order to monitor and identify individuals who behave aggressively so that the police can arrest and prosecute where necessary

Dealing with Potential Flashpoints More Effectively

Understanding in depth why incidents of violence and aggression or challenging behaviour could happen is essential in being able to put in place effective procedures and control measures to minimise the risk.

Here are some practical steps that can be taken:

- Consider in your deliberations, **the phases of the assault cycle** (Kaplan and Wheeler 1983):
 - Triggers – What was the initial negative event that triggered an anger response that led to the incident? When was a change in behaviour observed, e.g. non-verbal or verbal? How could improvements be made to eliminate potential triggers? Minimise the impact through revised training programmes to upskill employees in identifying and managing the initial emotional response. This will hopefully avoid the situation escalating and promote more positive outcomes
 - Escalation – What occurred that may have escalated the situation? How can this be prevented? Consider training employees in early interventions and de-escalation techniques
 - Crisis – Did the incident result in a real risk to employee safety, and how could this be prevented or minimised in future? Where immediate steps taken to minimise the risk such as calling for colleagues, security or the police to help and withdrawing to a safe space?
 - Recovery – What occurred to transition the situation from crisis to recovery? What more could be put in place?
 - Post Crisis – The introduction of ‘after incident reviews’ may be useful to reflect on incident causations and discussions around future improvements that could be made. This could be conducted using a multi-disciplined group, e.g. as part of the regular health and safety committee meeting
- Reiterate a ‘zero tolerance’ to all forms of violence and aggression in the workplace towards employees and any other persons who may be acting on behalf of the organisations. An example of such a policy statement is ‘...*We encourage everyone to act courteously and without violence, abuse or harassment.... Any behaviour which causes our employees to feel uncomfortable, embarrassed or threatened will not be tolerated. Any instance or threat of physical abuse will be reported to the police....*’
- Review existing risk assessments, policies and procedures in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and instigate additional control measures where appropriate. Examples of additional measures include improvements to security arrangements, improved lighting in car parks and external areas, additional training to public facing employees
- Consult and communicate with employees on a regular basis to discuss where they may be seeing changes **in people’s behaviours** and possible areas where aggressive and challenging behaviours may become a risk. Keep discussions objective and fact based, taking a sensitive approach should employees feel uncomfortable revealing information that they perceive may impact their colleagues or employment prospects
- Identify where potentially violent or aggressive behaviour may occur:
 - pinch points, e.g. products in high demand, queues for goods or services
 - trigger points, e.g. reduced staffing levels, lack of information and clarity on new processes, customers not receiving expected outcomes
- Consider methods of raising the alarm should the situation not become quickly under control such as panic buttons, referral to a more senior employee

- Train employees in de-escalation and calming techniques as part of their conflict resolution training. Undertake refresher training prior to re-opening and then at regular intervals thereafter
- Thorough incident investigation – establish the causes to understand the systemic pinch points or trigger points by considering all elements including the location, organisational policies, the task/interaction and those involved in the interaction

The [Suzy Lamplugh Trust](#) is a not-for-profit organisation whose vision is to work towards a society where everyone feels safer and free from the risk of violence. As part of their work they offer some useful tips, training and support strategies. One such example is LEAPS, a calming strategy for defusing aggression that could be used in de-escalation training:

- Listen – show the person you are taking their concerns seriously
- Empathise - shows you understand their situation
- Acknowledge/Ask Questions - to find out exactly what is making the person angry
- Paraphrase - shows understanding of their concerns
- Summarise - to highlight the issue they have raised and show that you understand them

Organisational and Personal Resilience

In periods of high demand, such as the rapidly changing world we face during the coronavirus pandemic, developing organisational and personal resilience is more important now than ever. By providing support to employees, they will be better equipped to deal with high pressure, confrontational or potentially violent and aggressive situations that may arise in the course of their changed work environment.

The key to success is developing a flexible, dynamic and holistic strategy to help employees handle high pressure periods or adverse situations, such as dealing with a disruptive queue of customers. Think about the options that are appropriate right now, this may require some short-term investment but ultimately support the long-term sustainability of the business.

Research led programmes are available to support personal and organisational resilience such as the BSI/Cransfield University Organizational Resilience framework [BSI Organisational Resilience Framework](#) or the [Challenge of Change Programme](#).

Checklist

A Managing Violence and Aggression During the COVID-19 Pandemic Checklist is presented in Appendix 1 which can be tailored to your own organisation.

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For more information please visit:

[Aviva Risk Management Solutions – Specialist Partners](#)

Sources and Useful Links

- [Health and Safety Executive \(HSE\) – Work-related violence](#)
- [Petros – Resilience for Life](#)
- [BSI/Cransfield School of Management – Organizational Resilience Research](#)
- [Resilient Organisations](#)
- [BS 65000 – Guidance on Organizational Resilience](#)
- [Promoting Professional Resilience – Jo Clarke](#)
- [CIPD and IOSH – Developing Resilience: An evidence-based guide for practitioners](#)
- [Murdoch University – Why is COVID-19 making people so aggressive?](#)
- [HSE – Violence in health and social care](#)
- [Ambulance Today – Violence and Aggression Experienced by Ambulance Drivers During the Coronavirus Pandemic](#)
- [Working safely during coronavirus \(COVID-19\) – GOV.UK](#)

Additional Information

Relevant Loss Prevention Standards include:

- [Claims Defensibility](#)
- [Violence to Employees](#)
- [Managing Change – Liability](#)
- [Homeworking](#)

To find out more, please visit [Aviva Risk Management Solutions](#) or speak to one of our advisors.

Email us at riskadvice@aviva.com or call 0345 366 6666*

*Calls may be recorded and/or monitored for our joint protection.

Appendix 1 - Managing Violence and Aggression During the COVID-19 Pandemic Checklist



Location	
Date	
Completed by (name and signature)	

	Managing Violence and Aggression - General	Y/N	Comments
1.	Are policies and procedures up to date and have they been communicated to all employees and volunteers?		
2.	Do Covid-Secure risk assessments include the risk of violence and aggression where appropriate?		
3.	Is training carried out for all employees and refresher training undertaken where required on conflict management and resolution techniques?		
4.	Are pre-employment checks completed for all new starters, e.g. DBS checks where job role requires, criminal record checks?		
5.	Are responsibilities and accountabilities assigned to individuals and are these reviewed regularly?		
6.	Are procedures or guidelines in place for employees who are frontline workers, e.g. reception staff, door hosts, call centres?		

	Incident Reporting	Y/N	Comments
7.	Have employees and volunteers been reminded of the incident reporting procedures and whistleblowing policy?		
8.	Is trend analysis undertaken at regular intervals to assess the possible impact of the pandemic on violent and aggressive incidents?		

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