



Workplace aggression during COVID-19

The emergence of COVID-19 across the globe has created a new work health and safety risk that retail businesses need to manage. Many businesses are throwing all their resources at this situation to keep their business afloat, while at the same time working out the most practical measures to keep their workers safe from exposure to the COVID-19.

While retailers must continue to focus on health risks from COVID-19 in the workplace, it is imperative retailers recognise workers may be at an increased risk of exposure to other hazards stemming from the current situation, such as workplace aggression and violence.

Lifeline explains, during times like this, people may be feeling afraid, worried, anxious, and overwhelmed by the constantly changing alerts and media coverage regarding the spread of the virus.ⁱ While people are perceptive to change, they may express irritability and anger. As a result, retail workers who are dealing with the public may be at an increased risk of exposure to heightened anxiety and aggression from customers.

Media channels share stories of retail workers exposed to customer aggression and violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a Facebook post, a member of the public shares his concern for supermarket staff after he attended his local supermarket and noticed signs displayed asking customers to “respect the staff. When he approached the register, he expressed to the retail worker; he was staggered that the signs were needed. The worker responded with, “**the abuse goes on all day**, and there was a recent incident of a customer abusing me for not cleaning the counter between each customer.” The Facebook post called for the public to be considerate of the staff in these workplaces.

In a [media statement](#), on 24 March 2020, the SDA - a union representing retail workers, called for additional steps to ensure the safety of workers during the pandemic. The SDA called on retailers to ‘**take a zero-tolerance approach to customer violence and abuse.**’

Supermarket giant Woolworths has responded to the issue by communicating they have a zero-tolerance policy on abusive and aggressive behaviour. Large signs displayed in-store inform shoppers of zero tolerance on aggressive and abusive behaviour will not be tolerated. Our team is here to help, not to be hurt”. An [article](#) to customers on 18 March 2020 requests customers to treat their “dedicated workers” with the courtesy and respect they deserve. They remind customers the company has a zero-tolerance policy on abusive and aggressive behaviour. Other retail stores have adopted a similar approach.

Worker’s psychological and physical health and safety can be adversely affected by exposure to workplace violence. This can increase the likelihood of workers experiencing a stress response. – Safe Work Australia



What do retail businesses need to do to manage the risk of workplace aggression?

Retail businesses have a duty under the health and safety Act to manage risks associated with exposure to hazards arising from work that could result in physical or psychological harm. The duty is to ensure the health and safety of workers and other people at the workplace so far as is reasonably practicable, including by:

- providing and maintaining a work environment without risk to health and safety
- providing and maintaining safe systems of work
- monitoring the health of workers and the conditions at the workplace
- consulting with workers and their representatives on work health and safety matters, and
- providing information, training, instruction, and supervision so workers can safely perform their work activities

As work-related violence can arise from situations that increase stress and conflict, this is the time for retail businesses to take a systematic approach to manage customer aggression risks to ensure the health and safety of the workforce. Regulator guidance material suggests businesses follow the risk management process in consultation with workers, health and safety representatives, and any other relevant duty holders. This involves:

- identifying hazards
- assessing risks, if necessary
- controlling risks
- reviewing hazards and control measures to ensure they are working as planned

If you require further guidance on how to manage work-related violence risks, you can access a range of guidance material. Links are provided below (note: this list is not exhaustive).

- [Work-related violence, Safe Work Australia](#)
- [Preventing and responding to work-related violence, Workplace Health, and Safety QLD](#)
- [Preventing and responding to work-related violence, SafeWork NSW](#)
- [Occupational violence and aggression, WorkSafe Victoria](#)
- [No one deserves a serve, SDA](#)

ⁱ Mental health and wellbeing during the Coronavirus COVID-19 outbreak. (2020). Retrieved 2 April 2020, from <https://www.lifeline.org.au/get-help/topics/mental-health-and-wellbeing-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>