

## The pain is more than you can imagine Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace

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*Fear is the cheapest room in the house,  
I would like to see you living in better conditions*

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### YOU ARE NOT ALONE

The childhood rhyme, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me" is far from the truth when it comes to bullying and harassment in the workplace. It is the unrelenting nature of bullying that diminishes and demoralizes those targeted over time. Victims start to feel that there is no escape - no way out. In fact, the dire sense of isolation, rejection, humiliation and fear leaves the victim in a state of distress that can lead to extreme outcomes of severe depression and at times, suicidality. It is no small feat to recover from the worst of these circumstances.

If you think that bullying only occurs on the playground, then it is time to rethink the magnitude of the problem.

In the WorkSafe BC pamphlet, Reid (2014) defined workplace bullying as "any inappropriate conduct or comment by a person towards a worker that the person knew or reasonably should have known would cause that worker to be humiliated or intimidated." Silverman (2013), defined bullying as a "systematic aggression and violence targeted towards one or more individuals by one individual or by a group."

Are you a teacher targeted in a social media attack? Maybe you are a military member awaiting medical discharge and remain vulnerable to bullying by peers or superior officers. Have you tried your best to get along with other employees at your office only to find that the office bully has sought you out repeatedly undermining your role, humiliating and embarrassing you in front of co-workers? Maybe you are working in a factory and you are struggling with ongoing aggressive "pranks" which are leaving you feeling on edge and unsettled? Whatever your circumstance is the very real impact of bullying is likely leaving you feeling at risk and vulnerable for future attacks.

### THIS IS HURTING A LOT OF PEOPLE

The Canada Safety Council outlines the following surprising statistics:

- One in six workers has been bullied.
- One in five workers has seen a colleague bullied.
- The prevalence of workplace bullying is four times more common than workplace discrimination.
  - It is likely that the bullying is being underreported
  - The target is typically capable and affable at the workplace

The number of workers who experience bullying in Canada is surprisingly high. In fact, 40% of Canadian workers experience bullying on a weekly basis (Lee & Brotheridge, 2007).

In a study conducted by Grenny and Maxfield (VitalSmarts, 2014), co-authors of New York Times bestsellers “Crucial Conversations” and “Influencer”, results corroborated the significant numbers of workers experiencing bullying.

- 96% of survey respondents experienced bullying at work
- 54% of workplace bullies have been at it for 5-plus years
- 89% of bullies have been at it for more than a year
- Some have gone on for over 30+ years
- 80% of respondents said the bully affected five or more people

### **IN THE REAL WORLD**

In my practice, I frequently help people with stress and particularly with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Compassion Fatigue (caregiver exposure to secondary trauma). I regularly work with people who experience symptoms consistent with PTSD while expressing stories of bullying and harassment in the workplace.

So why would this be?

The idea of being part of the larger human community is woven into our DNA. We are by nature social beings and tribal in an evolutionary context. So, from an evolutionary perspective, if you are rejected or isolated from the tribe your chances of survival are very slim. This reaches a deep place within our emotional psyche and rejection and isolation creates an extreme sense of vulnerability. In our society, we are able to return to our homes, cubicles or workspaces, and in many cases close the door. But social isolation on its own is a known precipitant to feelings of anxiety and depression (Hutchison et al. 2005; Sofield & Salmond, 2003). If this is paired with bullying and harassment, the feelings of isolation are often paired with negative self-perception and even self-loathing.

In one example, "Sheila" scheduled a series of appointments (actual name, personal details and circumstances have been altered to protect privacy). She explained that she was a government worker and had enjoyed her work for the past 11 years. After moving into a new role, she found herself in a tense work environment where one employee (let's call her Gloria) seemed to have an agenda of isolating her from her colleagues and undermining her competency. For Sheila, this was a completely new experience. She had always enjoyed good relations with her colleagues and was known to be a competent, hard working employee. Initially, she figured she could just keep her head down and focus on her work but she noticed that this was not possible as Gloria seemed to be setting little traps for her and even threatening her directly, at times.

Sheila outlined a few examples:

1. She was left out of meetings that she was supposed to attend. Gloria was in charge of these notifications and Sheila was aware that her "no-shows" had been noticed by the area manager.
2. Gloria would invite a group of staff for lunch, deliberately leaving out Sheila.

3. Inter-office mail that she prepared for specific team members, regularly, went missing. This resulted in missed deadlines and perceived poor performance on Sheila's part. Sheila was startled to find the contents of her mail in the recycling station beside Gloria's desk.
4. On one occasion, Gloria confronted Sheila when they were alone. Gloria said "If you think it is bad now, just wait" and "you can't take my job and not suffer!" Sheila realized that Gloria was declaring a type of war. Gloria had applied for the role that Sheila was offered and resented her for this.
5. Leaving work one night, Gloria stood with a few of her work colleagues and started taunting Sheila. "Guess you haven't figured out that you aren't wanted here yet?" Gloria said, "Can't you see that we can do without your garbage work?"

The list goes on but these events were simply minor events at the early stages of the bullying, increasingly worsening over time and resulting in what Sheila experienced as an office-wide campaign against her. She noticed that the other office workers feared Gloria and would do anything not to cross her. Sheila realized that this was probably not the first person bullied by Gloria but that was no consolation, given her situation.

The VitalSmarts (2014) Survey found:

- 62% of the respondents witnessed bullies sabotaging of others' work or reputations
- 52% witnessed browbeating, threats, or intimidation
- 4% witnessed physical intimidation or assault
- 20% of the victim respondents say that they lost over 7 hours a week of time due to bullying (approximately \$8800 in lost wages every year)

She feared for her career and began to question her own competence and value in the workforce. After work, she would return home feeling demoralized and confused. In fact, over time her work did suffer as symptoms of anxiety and depression began to worsen. The situation was also impacting her personal life. She would isolate at home, was easily moved to tears and reluctant to engage in social activities with her friends or family.

After months of worsening conditions, she finally went to the manager and explained her concerns. She was informed that the best approach was for her to speak with Gloria directly and resolve her problems with her. Sheila was horrified as she did not feel safe speaking with Gloria directly and now she felt unsupported by the management team and left to deal with her tormentor, without any assistance.

She booked a meeting with the Human Resources team and explained the situation in detail. She was met with a cool tone and informed that it is expensive to confront these issues and better left to the department to deal with minor problems. She was told that she had to work on her social skills and reflect back to what she might have done to offend Gloria. She was finally informed that if she feels there is no other way to address "her problems" than they may be able to schedule a meeting for her to speak with Gloria along with an HR Manager in the room.

She left the meeting on the parting remark that Gloria was one of their best workers and that Sheila needs to find a way to get along with her colleagues. Sheila's mood took a turn for the worse at this point as she felt there would be no way out of the bullying and the workplace would continue to feel toxic for her.

It is shocking to imagine that Sheila's concerns were discounted and that no support was made available. Yet the work by Silverman (2013) helps us to put this into context. Silverman's (2013) study published by the Journal of Managerial Psychology, found that bullies at the workplace receive more positive evaluations and higher levels of professional success than their victim counterparts. In addition, bullies were recognized as strategists who charmed supervisors and manipulated others to get ahead, all the while abusing their colleagues. It is also interesting to note that women tend to target women more frequently than men in bullying incidents, which is consistent with the case of Gloria and Sheila (Strauss, 2016).

Having met with Sheila over the course of several months, it was easy for me to recognize that she was easy to get along with and presented as bright, organized and pleasant. The reality is that these qualities are actually quite typical of people who are bullied.

Sheila had a great work record, excellent references and knew that there were jobs that she could apply to. In fact, she had previously been scouted by a head-hunter and realized that if she was going to thrive in life she would have to leave this workplace.

I consider Sheila one of the lucky ones. She was able to make a successful transition from a terrible workplace to a place where she felt respected, valued and part of a team. When companies lose workers because of bullying and harassment the costs are high. They lose skilled workers who are hard to find, replace, retain and expensive to train. The remaining team members remain unsafe from the onslaught of a future bullying attack and the bully learns that their behaviour will go unchallenged, emboldening them to future impact on other workers.

The Workplace Bullying Institute found that, of those experiencing workplace bullying 13 % were transferred to new roles; 40% left the organization voluntarily; 24% were terminated and in only 23% of cases were the identified bullies punished. These numbers make it easy to see that in most cases, there is a secondary wound, where the organization fails to protect the victim or to punish the bully.

### **CONSEQUENCES OF BULLYING & HARASSMENT**

In another case, a client experienced extreme workplace bullying after a workplace injury. The individual was a military member and it was while he was awaiting military discharge that the worst incidents of bullying occurred. By the time he appeared in my office, he exhibited noteworthy symptoms of severe depression concurrent with anxiety and post-trauma symptoms. It is important to recognize the link between stress and depression and to understand how the neurophysiology of these symptoms can intertwine. From the perspective of the bodily reaction to ongoing stress - the hormones Cortisol and Adrenaline, as well as the nervous system are implicated. Both hormones ignite to prepare the body to address threats to safety, whether real or perceived. Given the very real events for my client (i.e., threats, bullying, harassments, false accusations and charges) that occurred during this man's military career, he was diagnosed with significant mental health disorders (i.e., Other Specified Trauma/Stressor Related Disorder; Major Depressive Disorder; Panic Disorder).

In addition to the neurophysiological symptoms, his beliefs and perceptions of being treated unfairly; put at risk; and of feeling uncertain of his ability to succeed in life seemed to come directly from numerous incidents of being bullied and threatened. Subsequently, he experienced elevated levels of depression, extreme emotional turmoil, felt quite dejected and highly anxious. High levels of anxiety and

depression are known to interfere with information-processing functions, making it difficult for a person to perform well in tasks requiring concentration, attention to detail and mental clarity. Even motivated and competent individuals may experience noteworthy mental health strain as a direct result of being targeted by a bully.

Feelings of lack of trust, suspicion, being at risk and lack of personal safety are all common responses. These feelings combined with symptoms of depression, disrupted sleep, nightmares, anxiety, stress are significant and debilitating.

From a psychological perspective, individuals who experience bullying may be at great risk of re-triggering incidents. These can occur whenever they are exposed to reminders of bullying events or people who are similar to the bully. These can result in extreme turmoil; fearful reactions; insecurity; inappropriate behavioural reactivity; startle response; social isolation; reduced self-worth; harsh self-criticism; impulse-control problems; set-backs; disturbed sleep; symptom-exacerbation; feelings of being at risk/vulnerable and suicidal thoughts or self-harm behaviours.

### **WHO IS THE BULLY?**

Chamorro-Premuzic (2015) explored workplace bullies and the victims of bullying with a sample of 224 Canadian university students between ages 18-47 with work experience. Not surprisingly, workplace bullies tended to exhibit malicious traits such as “Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy”. These traits gave the perpetrators short-term advantages but harmed long-term relationships, utilizing tactics such as “superficial charm, fearless confrontation, and bold aggression”. There was evidence that the bullies had a tendency to pick on people similar to themselves and were also bullied at least once a week in the last 18 months. The study found that bullies tend to be extraverted, assertive, thrill-seeking, fearless and confident.

O'Farrell and Nordstrom (2013) reported that chaotic work environments were likely to produce higher incidents of bullying. The chaotic work environments were typically “lacking transparency, accountability, and appropriate rewards and guidelines.” Employees were more likely to engage in bullying behaviours as they were dissatisfied, burnt-out or poorly managed.

### **CHALLENGING THE BULLY**

The VitalSmarts (2014) report suggests that, “a bully can change if someone stands up to him or her and helps them see the consequences of their actions. Otherwise, it will simply continue.”

The report (VitalSmarts, 2014) encourages individuals within the workplace to challenge inertia or the tendency to remain silent in response to a bully, using the following approaches:

- Reverse thinking – Think about the risks of NOT speaking up first, before thinking about the risks of speaking up. This reverse ordered thinking will make people become more likely to speak up.
- Present Facts. Leave out provocative language or judgments. Be specific.
- Validate concerns. Understand that bullying was triggered by some legitimate concern. Validate the concern but show that the way in which it was handled is not tolerated.
- Maintain boundaries

Many provinces and states in North America have legislation in place to address bullying in the workforce and it is the responsibility of organizations to adopt policies to ensure employee safety. In

Ontario, **Bill 168** came into effect in 2010 to amend the Occupational Health and Safety Act with respect to violence and harassment in the workplace and other matters. Organizations are required to have policies, programs, measures and procedures in place to address workplace bullying. Workers are entitled to review these policies and recognize that they have rights.

### **THE FINAL STRAW**

The reality of the workplace bullying story is that the words and actions of a bully can hurt. This along with the potential secondary wound of not being supported by one's workplace can leave the victim feeling at risk and unable to tolerate the toxic workplace. Knowing your rights is helpful as there may be mechanisms that go beyond the workplace. Nonetheless, most people prefer to preserve their jobs at the risk of their well-being. Many remain for years in unmanageable workplaces and tolerate bad behaviours. The emotional and even physical costs are huge, both for the individual and the workplace as a whole. Not speaking up perpetuates the power of the bully and leaves other employees feeling vulnerable. Workplaces where there is poor guidance or a chaotic unmanaged environment can result in the most dangerous scenarios for potential incidents of bullying.

If you are facing bullying in your workplace, ensure that there is an anti-bullying policy in place with actionable steps for resolution. If there is no policy in place, your best course of action may truly be to leave before you feel so demoralized and diminished by the incidents that it becomes difficult to search for new employment. Finding a safe place to work, where you are respected and your work valued can put you back on the road to feelings of confidence and competence.

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