

balance

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Bullying in the workplace

When you close your eyes and imagine a bully, chances are you'd picture an elementary school child in a playground faster than an image of an adult in the workplace. But the unfortunate reality is, bullying is also alive and well in the corporate world.

In fact, workplace bullying in Canada is 300 to 400 per cent more prevalent than sexual harassment or racial discrimination. Additionally, 40 per cent of Canadians have experienced repeated acts of bullying on the job. It's a real and prominent issue that can have crushing emotional and psychological consequences.

What is workplace bullying?

The Workplace Bullying Institute defines bullying as "repeated, health-harming mistreatment" that takes the form of verbal abuse or offensive conduct or behaviour that is threatening, humiliating or intimidating. In the corporate world, bullying is usually psychological in nature rather than physical, and is often about personal control, power or striving for career progression.

How to recognize workplace bullying

It is often said that people don't leave jobs, they leave management – an overbearing boss is the number one reason cited for quitting a job. It is sometimes difficult, however, to determine if your supervisor's behaviour is due to a strong management style, a difficult personality or a straight-up bully.

One good way to help determine if an action or statement could be classified as bullying is to use *the reasonable person test*. Ask yourself, would most people consider the action or statement unacceptable? If the answer is yes to that question, you might have a bully in the workplace. Further, consider how often the occurrences below happen in your workplace.

Trademarks of workplace bullying

- Overloading a person with work yet removing their authority to make decisions;
- Yelling and shouting at a person, rather than giving constructive feedback;
- Unfairly criticizing a person — often in front of others;
- Punishing a person without cause;
- Underutilizing a person to the point that they feel useless;
- Setting unattainable deadlines that could cause the person to fail;
- Withholding necessary information;
- Making offense jokes, remarks or spreading rumours;
- Invading a person's privacy;
- Declining requests for training and blocking deserved promotions;
- Physically abusing a person or threatening abuse.

Looking for additional support? Your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) can help. You can receive support through a variety of resources. Call your EFAP at 1 800 387-4765 or visit workhealthlife.com.

Effects of workplace bullying

There are a range of effects experienced by people who are bullied, including:

- Feelings of anger, frustration or vulnerability;
- Loss of confidence;
- Inability to sleep and loss of appetite;
- Stomach pains and headaches;
- Feelings of panic or anxiety, especially about going to work;
- Increased tension and stress, at work and at home;
- Decreased morale and productivity.

Workplace bullying trademarks and the effects can be seen in these real life experiences below:

"There were days that I would go home with stomach pains that felt like a huge knot in my stomach that wouldn't go away. I couldn't shake that stressful, anxious feeling created by my intimidating boss," explained Kristen, a manager working in the public sector. "I'm a high performer, and this seemed to intimidate my former boss. He bullied me to meet unattainable deadlines, micro-managed me, removed my ability to make decisions and was over critical of everything I did. It undermined my confidence, increased my anxiety, and made me dread going to work every day. If she hadn't have left, I would have," said Tim, a communications consultant working in healthcare.

What to do if you're being bullied at work

Many organizations have put a code of conduct or anti-bullying policy in place. If yours has one, ask for a copy and adhere to it. If not, speak with your Human Resources department or reach out to your Employee and Family Assistance Program for support or advice. Additionally, you may wish to:

- Professionally confront the bully to let them know that their behaviour is unacceptable;
- Alert superiors to the behaviour if it continues after speaking to the bully;
- Continue to do your job well and connect with co-workers;
- Record the incidences of bullying for future reference, if required;
- Avoid spending time alone with the bully.

Facts about workplace bullying

- 40% of Canadian workers experience bullying on a weekly basis;
- Bullied employees spend about 30% of their time defending themselves and seeking support from colleagues;
- Over 70% of bullies have a more senior position than their target;
- 58% of bullies are women;
- 17% of bullies are co-workers or colleagues.

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Bullied children: What to do when it hits home

As a parent, one of the last things you ever want to experience is your child being bullied. "My eldest son just told me that he's being bullied by six other boys," explains Kate, a mother of three. "It's heart wrenching, especially knowing that he's at school without me to protect him." Sadly, stories like Kate's are all too common. In fact, 47 per cent of Canadian parents have reported that one of their children has been a victim of bullying at some point during their childhood. Whether it is physical or emotional, the impact to children is the same: it's devastating.

The three types of bullying

It's important to stress that bullying is not about the occasional rift or spat between friends that ends up in hurtful words or a one-off shove. Rather, bullying is aggressive, sometimes relentless, behaviour that involves a power imbalance where the bully attacks its target.

There are three different kinds of bullying that are most prevalent amongst school-aged children:

Verbal: This is bullying in its simplest form and is characterized by spreading rumours, name-calling, taunting, teasing and insults. What may appear to adults as *kids being kids* is actually very hurtful and damaging to the child, and can cause self-esteem issues and depression.

Physical: The most obvious form of bullying involves physical violence that may or may not be visible to parents. This type of physical violation often involves hitting, shoving, spitting, punching, pinching or slapping. It not only humiliates the child and affects their confidence, but makes them fearful of attending school.

Cyber: With the ease of access to the Internet and mobile devices, cyberbullying has quickly become a prominent type of bullying, and it's sometimes difficult for parents to spot. From Facebook wall posts, to instant messages and texts, humiliation is just a click away for many bullies. Cyberbullying often involves threats, insults or name calling online. A change in your child's behaviour after he or she accesses the Internet or a mobile device may indicate a problem.

Top signs of bullying

Unless you have a child that communicates with you regularly about what may be bothering him or her, you may need to do a little digging to determine if your child is a target of bullying. Here are some things to watch out for:

- Mood changes, such as acting depressed or anxious;
- Defiant about going to school or attending school activities;
- Changes to eating and sleeping patterns;
- Lower grades;
- Emotional or moody after phone calls, texts or accessing the Internet;
- Unexplained physical injuries, such as bruises, bumps, scrapes or other skin irritations;
- Sudden changes in their social circle and social activities, indicating that they may have fewer friends;
- Lost possessions, such as electronics, jewelry or clothing.

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What to do if your child is bullied

- Keep talking to your child and ask probing questions about his or her day to learn if the bullying is getting better or worse;
- Reassure your child so they know that it is not their fault;
- Report the incident(s) to your child's school and follow up;
- Consider seeking help for your child to deal with the trauma of bullying (school counsellor or mental health professional);
- If the abuse is physical or physically threatening, you may need to involve the police — find out about the laws in your community;
- Take care of yourself – seek support groups, talk to friends and family, or contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program.

Tips to help a bullied child

- Tell the bully to stop;
- Avoid the bully or walk away when approached;
- Travel in groups or use the buddy system;
- Try not to react to the bully; learn to adopt a *poker face* to discourage the behaviour;
- Report the bullying to teachers, parents and principals;
- Journal about the bullying so that there's a record of events;
- When possible, avoid bringing bullying *triggers* to school if being harassed for lunch money or material possessions.

Bullying and Canadian children

- About 33% of Canadian adolescents have reported being bullied;
- Approximately 34% of adult Canadians experienced bullying during their school years;
- Girls are more likely to be bullied on the Internet than boys;
- 16% of high school students (grades 9-12) were bullied online in the past year.

Resources:

<http://www.workplacebullying.org/individuals/problem/definition/>
<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/windsor/story/2011/12/06/wdr-cbsa-bullying-johnston.html>
http://careerplanning.about.com/od/bosscoworkers/a/bullies_at_work.htm
<http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-11-21/taming-the-workplace-bully>
<http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/bullying.html>
<http://alis.alberta.ca/ep/eps/tips/tips.html?EK=11608>
<http://hiring.monster.ca/hr/hr-best-practices/workforce-management/improving-employee-relations/harassment-at-work-canada.aspx>
<http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/45838.html#7>
<http://www.wahm.com/articles/3-types-of-bullying-that-your-child-may-encounter.html>
<http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/45838.html>
<http://www.stopbullying.gov/index.html>
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mary-l-pulido-phd/is-my-child-being-bullied_b_1199696.html
<http://www.empoweringparents.com/My-Child-is-Being-Bullied.php#>

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