

# The Toll of Workplace Bullying

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## OVERVIEW

In the fall of 2013, a story broke in the news about a victim of bullying. A football player left his team because he was being bullied. But this wasn't some local newspaper reporting on a little kid on a Pop Warner team. It was national news about a professional lineman for the Miami Dolphins. The player, Jonathan Martin, reported that he was leaving the team because he could no longer take the abuse he was getting from some teammates (Pelissero, 2013).

In a January 2014 interview that aired on NBC, he described what almost any victim's experience would be like: "I wish I would have had more tools to solve my situation," Martin said to interviewer Tony Dungy, the former NFL head coach of the Indianapolis Colts (Connor, 2014). "I felt trapped, like I didn't have a way to make it right. It came down to a point where, you know, I felt it was best to just remove from myself from the situation." People found it

hard to believe that this highly paid, highly educated (Stanford graduate), mountain of a man could be bullied. But that's the nature of bullying. It does not matter how big victims are, or how smart they are, or how old they are. They can be kids in the school yard or executives in a board meeting. Bullying can happen to anyone, anytime, anywhere.

Bullying may be more common than most people think. According to a study commissioned by the Workplace Bullying Institute, one in three employees experience bullying in the workplace either as a victim or as a witness suffering collateral damage (Zogby International, 2010). Seventy-five percent of those instances involved top-down bullying by a supervisor. Few organizational or operational flaws can wreak as much havoc as a bully in the workplace, and yet many bullies get away with their abusive behavior every day. Many employers do not know that workplace bullies exist or they choose to

ignore the warning signs. This can result in tragic consequences for an office.

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Persistent and unchecked bullying can literally make people sick (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2012). It can result in emotional, psychological, and even physical harm (Rospenda, 2005). It can cause anxiety, hypertension, or heart disease (Kivimäki et al., 2003, p. 782). It can lower your body's immune system and make you feel hopeless, helpless, and worthless. It can lead to serious sleep disorders, and weight gain or loss, and cause an increased number of sick days.

Depression is the most common symptom of workplace bullying. A report commissioned by Safe Work Australia, stated that: "Workplace bullying was strongly associated with increased incidence of significant depression symptoms" (Butterworth et al., 2013). The study revealed that 40% of respondents to the survey who reported being bullied on the job had significant depression symptoms compared to 14% who had no history of workplace bullying. Authors of a

study conducted in France reported that workplace bullying was found to be a strong risk factor for depressive symptoms for men and women (Niedhammer et al., 2006); a study conducted in Sweden also found that even being a bystander to workplace bullying can lead to depression (Emdad et al., 2013). Symptoms of depression include (NIH National Worksite Program, 1995):

- Persistent sad or "empty" mood
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism
- Loss of interest or pleasure in ordinary activities, including sex
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
- Decreased energy, fatigue, being "slowed down"
- Thoughts of death or suicide, suicide attempts
- Sleep disturbances (insomnia, early-morning waking, or oversleeping)
- Irritability
- Eating disturbances (loss of appetite and weight, or weight gain)
- Excessive crying
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions
- Chronic aches and pains that don't respond to treatment.

And in the workplace, symptoms of depression often include:

- Decreased productivity

- Morale problems
- Lack of cooperation
- Safety risks, accidents
- Absenteeism
- Frequent statements about being tired all the time
- Complaints of unexplained aches and pains
- Alcohol and/or drug abuse (NIH National Worksite Program, 1995).

Paul Harvey, associate professor of organizational behavior, said in a recent news release from his institution, the University of New Hampshire: "Although the effects of abusive supervision may not be as physically harmful as other types of dysfunctional behavior, such as workplace violence or aggression, the actions are likely to leave longer-lasting wounds, in part, because abusive supervision can continue for a long time" (Harvey, quoted in Wright, 2013). It can be a hidden disease in an organization or office, leaving upper management wondering what's going on.

This is because bullying can often go undetected (McAvoy & Murtagh, 2003) (Williams, 2011). Victims of bullying are frequently silent about the abuse they are getting. They could be unaware of the fact that what they are experiencing is not normal. In other words, they may not even know they are being bullied. That may seem surprising, but bullies can seem like perfectly ordinary supervisors if that's all

the employees ever see. People whose work is constantly rejected for insignificant things and returned with sarcastic notes and scribbled comments throughout may just think they must be stupid and a poor worker. They blame themselves and just keep trying to work harder in fear that they are going to lose their job. They may not even recognize they are being manipulated by the abuser.

Victims may also feel ashamed to admit they are a victim of a bully. They see themselves as merely weak and unable to stand up to the boss. But instead of taking out their indignation at being belittled all the time by the bully boss, the anger gets shunted to beating up on themselves. They suffer in silence, and soon their work begins to suffer as well (Razdan, 2008). In many cases workers actually create self-fulfilling prophecies of failure in their careers by riding the downward spiral of despair.

Some bullying persists because victims feel powerless to do anything about it. In rough economic times, employees working under the supervision of a bully cannot easily find another job to move to, so they feel trapped in their current situation with no alternatives (Bruzzese, 2011). They feel oppressed but they have to keep their mouths shut for fear the bully boss will simply terminate them if they file a complaint and then they would be even worse off than before. Miserable *with* a job is preferable to miserable *without* a job, and

so tolerate abuse without reporting it (Marano, 1995).

One of the really tricky things is that bullies often produce the results their superiors want to see (Petrecca, 2010). They often are the kind of managers that meet corporate goals, and they do it on time. Who can argue with success, right (Lebowitz, 2013)? It may seem to the victim that if they file a complaint with upper management their charges will be ignored or worse yet that they may show themselves as some kind of loser who is unwilling to be a team player. Bullies recognize this vulnerability in some victims and will then even double-down on their abuse.

Likewise, depending on the psychological makeup of the bully, their bullying may be very specifically targeted at a particular individual. In that way if the victim complains about being bullied to a higher level of authority, the bully boss knows that his boss will naturally check with others in the office about the nature of the complaint. When everyone else says they don't have any problems with the boss, the bully boss counts on upper management to let the matter drop. This leaves the bully able to continue to abuse the victim without consequences.

This kind of targeted abuse can happen if the bully feels threatened by the expertise or social skills that an underling possesses. "Contrary to conventional wisdom," wrote self-help author Ray Williams, "the targets

of office bullies are not the new, inexperienced and less confident employees. The targets, according to research, are the highly competent, accomplished, experienced and popular employees" (Williams, quoted in Lebowitz, 2013). In this kind of situation the bully may be a co-worker rather than in a supervisory position. In order to protect their position within the hierarchy, they need to start to whittle away at the victim's self-confidence, strength, and reputation. They will also try to undercut the victim's efforts by blaming them of shoddy work. Bullies may actually set up a subordinate for failure by feeding them false or incomplete information about a work assignment.

Finally, some higher levels of authority don't recognize bullying for what it is: abusive behavior. Rather, they see a "tough-love" supervisor who is hard on their employees but gets the work done and hits all the milestones. Why in the world would senior management want to upset a good thing—the authoritarian supervisor makes the higher-up bosses look good.

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Anybody can be a victim. Even strong individuals can fall prey to a bully. Bullies are master manipulators who have often bullied their way to higher levels of management, leaving behind them a trail of people they have walked over. Bullies know what buttons to push on their targets to frustrate them and back them slowly into a corner where the normal instinct to fight or take flight is suppressed by the bully's abuse and a senior management that lets the bully get away with it. So often the only response of which the victim is capable is to freeze or fold. Depression, anxiety, shame, and other symptoms of great stress usually follow. Even an ordinarily strong person may be incapable of standing up to bullying that is free from reins. This behavior can often go undetected because victims, who are normally strong, are just too ashamed to admit to "allowing" themselves to be bullied. And the fact that the bully boss gets away with it simply compounds their reliance on dominant behavior to get things done and to eliminate competition (LaVan & Martin, 2008).

## ORIGIN OF BULLYING

Where do bullies come from? This brings up the old nature vs. nurture question (Shostak et al., 2009). In the case of bullies, it appears that both nature and nurture are important in understanding bullying behavior. Geneticists have contributed to our understanding of

abusive behavior. Though they have discovered no "bully gene," they are finding out that certain gene sequences are present in a statistically significant number of patients with certain mental illnesses that may predispose them to certain behaviors. Whether or not these genes are activated, however, depends on environmental factors such as psychological stressors at key moments in a person's development.

In terms of nurture, some individuals have learned in the school of hard knocks that life is about survival of the fittest. So their experience tells them that they must be dominant over any perceived opponent in order to get what they want and need. This kind of dominant behavior is thought to have arisen in our evolutionary history because of struggles to secure resources and mates, according to Joey Cheng and Jessica Tracy of the University of British Columbia. "Dominance," they wrote in *Psychological Inquiry*, "is seen in social relationships based on coercion, such as between...a boss and a victim." The boss creates fear in subordinates by "unpredictably and erratically" threatening the victim either explicitly or implicitly. The subordinates comply with the boss's demands in order to protect their welfare and security. "Dominants can attain a great deal of social influence" (Cheng & Tracy, 2013).

There are variations in the bully profile, according to Bullying Statistics (Bullying Statistics, 2013).

**Narcissistic Bully:** A highly self-centered individual who needs to put others down to maintain their self-importance.

**Impulsive Adult Bully:** They spontaneously fly off the handle and threaten others when they themselves feel threatened or upset by something that might have nothing to do with the victim.

**Physical Bully:** Some bullies will actually threaten to physically harm a subordinate, but this physical bully is more of an “in your face” kind of person “looming” over their victim to give them the sense of physical intimidation. They can also threaten an underling’s sense of security with their perceived power to hire and fire.

**Verbal Adult Bully:** Some of these bullies can be easily spotted; they make their commanding presence known by shouting and cursing. But the more subtle verbal bullies are harder to detect from outside the relationship because they usually utter their words where others cannot hear them. In addition, their favorite weapons may be as subtle as starting rumors about the victim or using sarcastic or demeaning language “to dominate or humiliate” a victim in a public way, such as in a staff meeting.

**Secondary Adult Bully:** This individual does not start the bullying but freely joins in. If this person sees someone under stress from a dominant individual they tend to gang up on that victim. This is called piling on or mobbing.

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While the primary targets of bully bosses are the ones who suffer the most abuse they are not the only ones. Bully bosses poison the entire work environment from top to bottom, affecting everyone including co-workers and the legitimate authority of the whole company or organization (Preidt, 2013). The news release from the University of New Hampshire also pointed out that “second-hand vicarious supervisory abuse [can lead to] greater job frustration, tendency to abuse other coworkers, and a lack of perceived organizational support” (Wright, 2013). Organizations that do not recognize and mediate instances of bullying in the workplace send a message that they

endorse the actions of the supervisor and that can cause an overall decrease in quality and productivity. Joe Grimm, a professor of journalism at Michigan State University and editor of *The New Bullying: How Social Media, Social Exclusion, Laws and Suicide Have Changed Our Definition of Bullying*, defined office bullying as “a manifestation of aggression at work that leaves professionals crippled with anxiety or fear” (Grimm, cited in Crocker, 2012).

The bully is quite often one who really knows how to work the system. They can spout all the current management buzzwords about supportive management but basically use it as a cover. By keeping their abusive behavior hidden, any charges made by individuals about his or her bullying will always come down to a “he said, she said” thing. They may have a “kiss up and kick down” personality, wherein they are always highly cooperative, respectful, and caring when talking to upper management but the opposite when it comes to their relationship with those whom they supervise (Petrecca, 2010).

Some bullies can even anticipate trouble and ward it off by planting seeds of doubt in the minds of their own supervisors about the work habits of the person whom they are targeting: “You know, I’m really concerned about Jean. Her work has been poor lately and she hasn’t been much of a team player. I’ve been trying to find out what’s bothering her, but she just acts

hostile in return.” After saying that, the bully knows that any complaint that Jean might lodge with upper management will be looked on suspiciously.

Scientific research on the personalities of bullies dates back at least to the 1950s and the “Authoritarian Personality Study” at the University of California at Berkeley (Adorno, 1993). Taking a look at the traits identified by these researchers in authoritarian personalities gives us a good picture into the typical bully’s psyche (Portis, 2011):

- A bully’s mistakes are always concealed or blamed on underlings
- A bully keeps the target under constant stress
- A bully’s power base is fear, not respect
- A bully withholds information from subordinates and keeps the information flow top-down only
- A bully blames conflicts and problems on subordinate’s “poor attitudes” and “character flaws”
- A bully creates an unnatural work environment where people constantly walk on eggshells and are compelled to behave in ways they normally would not.

If you find yourself in this kind of nightmare scenario, what can you do? Unless you can recognize the situation for what it is, i.e., the bad behavior of an

individual and not a legitimate authority, you may become another victim. The most typical reactions to bullying, as we have stated before, have to do with the survival instinct—“fight or flight”—and these are probably a victim’s healthier responses to bullying.

Flight is a legitimate and valid response to bullying. In fact, it is a very common one, especially in organizations in which upper management cannot or will not deal with the bullying. One can rather easily spot an office with a bullying problem—there is an exceptionally high rate of turnover. While not all places with high personnel turnover are sites of workplace bullying, nearly every place that has a bully in charge will have elevated staff turnover and absenteeism. In hard economic times, however, flight may not be an option, and fighting may be your only choice (Bruzzese, 2011).

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Fighting the bullying can require near heroic action, especially if the bullying targets just one or two individuals. It can also be a difficult challenge. There are some times when confrontation is called for. First, there is always a chance that the bully boss is laboring under the impression that this is the way to get things done and does not

recognize the havoc being wreaked on subordinates. A private meeting with the boss in which you clearly, professionally, and unemotionally tell him or her what you perceive to be happening and how you feel you could work much more efficiently and effectively with support and positive reinforcement just might clear things up right away. If the person doing the bullying is unaware of the harm they are causing, you may have opened their eyes. But even if that is not the case, the bullying personality may back off when presented with a strong counter personality. So standing your ground and making your case might prove successful for that reason.

Then again, confrontation may be totally wrong in your situation and could set off even more harassment and verbal abuse or increase the risk of being fired. If you sense that could be the case in your situation, a less confrontational approach might be called for. Then it is time to use the organization’s human resources operation to aid in a resolution.

Begin by documenting everything (The Muse, 2012): meetings, conversations, emails, or written notes about those occasions in which you have felt threatened or intimidated. Note any bad rumors that have suddenly appeared about you. But do not stop with verbal signals—try to capture moments in writing when the boss uses gestures, facial expressions, or other obvious body language that suggests intimidation, violence, force, or ridicule.



Identify any witnesses who may have seen or heard what happened. Note the date and time, the circumstances, specifically what was said, or what orders you were given. You can then send this information to yourself in an email that records the date it was sent. This documentation will become especially important if things were to “escalate, or official or legal consequences arise” and you need “to protect yourself and your job” (Kane, n.d.).

Once you have some specifics in hand, visit with your HR representative (Kane, n.d.). Present your observations in an organized fashion and explain the difficulties you are having with your supervisor as objectively as you can. Be sure to mention when the inappropriate behavior first started and how often it occurs, noting when you began to keep records if the bullying started before you began recording instances. If you have witnessed the boss bullying others in the office record these as well and mention their names as possible corroborators. Ask that the records be placed in your personnel file and afterwards send an email to the HR rep mentioning your meeting and what documentation you handed over for your file. Find out what the next steps are in the process. Will there be an investigation? Does the institution have policies specifically against bullying or are the institution’s policies on harassment broad enough to include bullying. Ask when will

you hear back from HR and what formal grievance procedures are available as a next step?

For example, if you are suffering from depression and are being treated for that you might even be eligible for protections under the Americans with Disabilities Act. “The Americans with Disabilities Act prevents employers with 15 or more employees from discriminating against people with serious health problems (including depression), and it requires them to accommodate disabled employees. In order to be protected by the law, however, employees must disclose the nature of their disability to their employers” (Harding, 2010). However, consider that step carefully because the stigma attached to mental illnesses still exists in our society.

As a last resort, if the organization does not address and the bullying continues, you have every right to seek an employment attorney to find out what legal remedies might be available (The Muse, 2012). This is a difficult path because many organizations do not have policies specifically on bullying and most places do not have laws covering it.

If you direct an office, you need to be sensitive to workplace bullying. You can read up on the topic at the very helpful website of the Workplace Bullying Institute, in Washington, DC ([www.workplacebullying.org](http://www.workplacebullying.org)). You need to assure your staff that workplace bullying

will not be tolerated and that they can always come to you anytime they are threatened or intimidated by a supervisor or another employee. Know and watch for the signs of a bully or victim of bullying so that you can identify and remediate bullying in your operation.

Finally, do a self-inventory of the ways in which you relate to your employees. To a certain extent we all engage in manipulative behavior from time to time and sometimes use our authority to get our way. We too need to be sensitive to the feelings of our personnel and watch for warning signs when dealing with them. You may be doing something that is being entirely misinterpreted by the employee, and causing them anxiety and loss of sleep. Those situations can be quickly and effectively dealt with in a short conference.

Bullying is a serious problem and as directors, managers, and staff members we need to ensure that it does not occur in our workplace. Otherwise our operations may be suffering. The old maxim, "it's the process, not the people," is not true all the time, especially if there is a bully in your midst. A bully can wreck a perfectly good

process. As their name suggests, they can be a real bull in the china shop.

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The finding of the Wells Report, which was commissioned by the National Football League to investigate the alleged bullying of Jonathan Martin, was that he was indeed subject to a persistent pattern of workplace harassment. The Report's conclusion is worth sharing: "[E]ven the largest, strongest and fleetest person may be driven to despair by bullying, taunting and constant insults. We encourage the creation of new workplace conduct rules and guidelines that will help ensure that players respect each other as professionals and people" (Wells, 2014).

You may have noticed that we overlooked one area of research administration workplace bullying, perhaps one that is most significant. Well, we will have to wait for another time to talk about faculty bullies.

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