

# The Workplace Bully: More Than Simple Stressor

*By Susan Gillpatrick, LPC, CTS, CEAP*

*Can you be persecuted into developing PTSD?*

What if, in your next team meeting, you get the now common but all too uncomfortable glare from your boss? The one that says, “Agree with me, *or else*.” The meeting begins. You sit; you listen; you nod your head. Your stomach churns, your heart races, and you consider any means of escape.

As time goes on, you lose sleep, find yourself cowering in your cubicle, and your mind is constantly reliving the feelings of intimidation and desperation from being controlled in your workplace.

## **It’s about control**

I am talking about workplace bullying. **The abusive and demeaning behaviors of a bully can infect a business like an incurable virus.** Bullying can take many forms but basically comes down to manipulative—and perhaps threatening—behavior that attempts to control a situation, a person, or groups of people. A bully can be a boss, a co-worker, or even a customer.

Workplace bullying has been referred to as psychological warfare. The workplace bully takes no responsibility for his or her behavior. They violate boundaries, reject you, betray you, and hijack your personal power. All bully behaviors are self-serving and calculating. They often leave victims confused if they have any rights or options for positive change.

To answer my original question: Yes, any person may develop PTSD that has been exposed to, or experienced a traumatic event. The traumatic event may have involved a threat to the individual’s physical or emotional health. And a victim of workplace bullying with

symptoms of PTSD will experience frequent, intrusive visualizations and replaying of events and conversations, to name a few.

PTSD can also result from the accumulation of many negative, yet non life-threatening events or experiences that occur in the workplace. Reactions to the traumatic event(s) can bring feelings of fear, anger, confusion, and—most debilitating – helplessness. Victims will try to avoid anything associated with the abuser. Others may have mental scarring from being bullied, but not the full effects of PTSD.

Further results of being bullied at work can result in a mental breakdown, deteriorating health, depression and even suicide. These negative outcomes are part of PTSD symptoms for many victims—including those who are bullied in the workplace.

### **Make time to get help**

The stress of “making the numbers” from a demanding organization is enough to send one over the edge, and I have seen that firsthand. It was a Friday afternoon and the Executive had stayed late every night that week, ignoring his family and his health. He had directions from his employer to produce more, no matter the costs. He was put down in front of his peers. His successes went without notice. To keep his job he did what it took – as long as he could take it. That Friday afternoon he placed a ladder near his desk to climb to the rafters with a rope. A note was left on his computer to his wife. The payroll manager with a deadline entered his closed-door office needing a signature. It was too late.

He was too busy to seek help for his stress crisis.

Symptoms of PTSD can also emerge in current bullied work situations but have roots in a previous trauma, such as domestic violence or child abuse. A current stressor can trigger a previous trauma. A critical boss can be a trigger for an abusive parent situation. The victim then has double the despair to cope with.

There is no doubt the symptoms of PTSD resulting from being bullied at a place of business can be very disruptive to the individual's personal and professional life.

If anyone feels they have been victimized by a workplace bully, they should not suffer through the stress alone. And experiencing symptoms of PTSD does not mean you are going crazy – you are simply having reactions common to being victimized and controlled. There are strategies for surviving and even excelling through situations like malicious meetings and demeaning day job dramas, or anywhere there lurks a workplace bully.

All companies should create a zero tolerance anti-bullying policy. This policy should be part of the wider commitment to a safe and healthful working environment and should have the full support of top management. Employees should be educated and trained about all types of workplace violence, including bullying behaviors that can produce significant physical and mental problems. They should be made aware of how to report such behaviors within the workplace, and when witnessed or reported, the bullying behavior should be addressed immediately. Employees may also want to consider discussing their physical and emotional health with their primary care physician, and with their family. Supportive family and trusted professionals can very helpful as victimized employees navigate through the corporate process of respect and resolutions.

There is no place for the Workplace Bully.

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