

## **Bullying more harmful than sexual harassment on the job, say researchers**

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Workplace bullying, such as belittling comments, persistent criticism of work and withholding resources, appears to inflict more harm on employees than sexual harassment, say researchers who presented their findings at a conference today.

“As sexual harassment becomes less acceptable in society, organizations may be more attuned to helping victims, who may therefore find it easier to cope,” said lead author M. Sandy Hershcovis, PhD, of the University of Manitoba. “In contrast, non-violent forms of workplace aggression such as incivility and bullying are not illegal, leaving victims to fend for themselves.”

This finding was presented at the Seventh International Conference on Work, Stress and Health, co-sponsored by the American Psychological Association, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health and the Society for Occupational Health Psychology.

Hershcovis and co-author Julian Barling, PhD, of Queen’s University in Ontario, Canada, reviewed 110 studies conducted over 21 years that compared the consequences of employees’ experience of sexual harassment and workplace aggression. Specifically, the authors looked at the effect on job, co-worker and supervisor satisfaction, workers’ stress, anger and anxiety levels as well as workers’ mental and physical health. Job turnover and emotional ties to the job were also compared.

The authors distinguished among different forms of workplace

aggression. Incivility included rudeness and discourteous verbal and non-verbal behaviors. Bullying included persistently criticizing employees' work; yelling; repeatedly reminding employees of mistakes; spreading gossip or lies; ignoring or excluding workers; and insulting employees' habits, attitudes or private life. Interpersonal conflict included behaviors that involved hostility, verbal aggression and angry exchanges.

Both bullying and sexual harassment can create negative work environments and unhealthy consequences for employees, but the researchers found that workplace aggression has more severe consequences. Employees who experienced bullying, incivility or interpersonal conflict were more likely to quit their jobs, have lower well-being, be less satisfied with their jobs and have less satisfying relations with their bosses than employees who were sexually harassed, the researchers found.

Furthermore, bullied employees reported more job stress, less job commitment and higher levels of anger and anxiety. No differences were found between employees experiencing either type of mistreatment on how satisfied they were with their co-workers or with their work.

“Bullying is often more subtle, and may include behaviors that do not appear obvious to others,” said Hershcovis. “For instance, how does an employee report to their boss that they have been excluded from lunch? Or that they are being ignored by a coworker? The insidious nature of these behaviors makes them difficult to deal with and sanction.”

From a total of 128 samples that were used, 46 included subjects who experienced sexual harassment, 86 experienced workplace aggression and six experienced both. Sample sizes ranged from 1,491 to 53,470 people. Participants ranged from 18 to 65 years old. The work aggression samples included both men and women. The sexual harassment samples examined primarily women because, Hershcovis

said, past research has shown that men interpret and respond differently to the behaviors that women perceive as sexual harassment.

Source: American Psychological Association

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