

Bullies in the workplace: Researcher examines the struggles for victims to tell their story

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The stories are shocking and heartbreaking, but they are often disjointed and hard to follow. In severe cases, the narratives are even more chaotic. This is reality for victims of workplace bullying and a major reason why they stay silent, said Stacy Tye-Williams, an assistant professor of communications studies and English at Iowa State University.

No one expects to go to work and feel as though they are back on the school playground, but [bullying](#) is all too common for many workers. Approximately 54 million workers, or 35 percent of U.S. employees, are targeted by a bully at some point in their careers, according to the Workplace Bullying Institute. Instead of reporting it, Tye-Williams found several of the people she interviewed for a study, published in *Management Communication Quarterly*, suffered silently.

"Many of the participants felt no one would believe them, or they were afraid of being labeled as a big cry baby or a whiner, so they didn't tell a manager or someone else in the organization," Tye-Williams said.

"When you experience serious trauma in the workplace, it's difficult to explain to people what is happening to you."

Tye-Williams and Kathleen Krone, a professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, collected narratives from 48 bullying [victims](#) for the study. More than half reported being bullied by their manager or boss, while others were targeted by a co-worker. Participants worked in

various fields including professional and technical, education, health care, banking and finance, as well as the military.

It was difficult for many of the victims to find the right words or to put the events in logical order to explain how the bullying started and escalated. Tye-Williams said the stories don't always have a distinct beginning, middle or end. Several months can pass before the victims realize there is a problem, because bullying often starts with subtle behaviors that make it hard to identify initially.

Order and timing are not the only challenges to forming a story. Victims said sharing their experience is like trying to describe the indescribable. How victims tell their stories makes all the difference in whether people believe what the targets are saying is true, Tye-Williams said.

"When the story is all over the place and feels disjointed or disconnected, people don't understand or they can't make sense of what happened. Then what often happens is the victim is not taken seriously or not believed, which is really sad because these victims tend to be the ones suffering most."

Supportive Co-Workers Can Help

Victims often feel ostracized because other employees, who witness or are aware of the bullying, are hesitant to get involved. Co-workers may want to help, but don't feel they have the power to change the situation or fear they too will become a target, said Tye-Williams. Studies have found that victims have lower levels of depression and higher levels of job satisfaction when they have a co-worker to talk to and provide support.

"If victims are not believed and don't have someone to talk to about their story, then they have a hard time formulating a narrative," Tye-Williams

said. "Even if you're not comfortable as a co-worker reporting the behavior, letting the victim tell you their story, go with you to have a drink and vent, or just feel believed can help. For a lot of victims, that process of being believed and having someone listen to their story is crucial in helping them better communicate about their experience."

Changing the Culture at Work

If a victim does report the bullying, it is important for managers to reserve judgment. Even when the story is hard to follow, managers need to listen and ask questions, Tye-Williams said. This will help the victim organize his or her thoughts and make it easier for the manager to understand what is going on.

The fact that a manager or boss was most often identified as the bully in the study could be a roadblock for change in smaller businesses. Not only do victims need to be heard, there needs to be action to stop the bullying and initiate a change in the organization's culture, Tye-Williams said. Targets are more likely to come forward and report the behavior in a supportive environment.

Schools focus a lot of attention on stopping and preventing bullying, but it is not as openly discussed in the workplace. Tye-Williams said some research shows children who are bullies in school continue that behavior as adults. Greater awareness will help, but even small, simple changes can make a difference.

"Sometimes people are already aware of bullying, but others want to know how it's different from harassment or discrimination, so awareness of the issue is important," Tye-Williams said. "It's also important that we learn how to treat each other better and reach out when people are being harmed. We can all make strides in that direction."

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