

A critical factor influencing stress at work (*in all professions and all countries*) is bullying. A study in the US concluded that one third of all stress related illnesses diagnosed in America could be attributed directly to bullying in the workplace. In South Africa 77.8% of employees admit to being bullied at some point in their career.

The International Labor Organization has indicated that workplace violence, both physical and emotional, is the single biggest threat to the workplace of the new millennium.

So what is Bullying?

Bullying is defined as *“repeated inappropriate behavior, direct or indirect, whether verbal, physical or otherwise, conducted by one or more persons against another at the place of work or in the course of employment, which would reasonably be regarded as undermining the individual’s rights to dignity at work”* - Source Irish Government Task Force

In my research I found many definitions but the main criteria which remains consistent in all sources is that this act is done with the intention to harm, and is prolonged in nature.

Why don’t people just quit?

At the risk of stating the obvious, we live in a time where unemployment rates are high, the economy is under pressure and job security no longer exists.

The simple fact of the matter is that sometimes we are forced to stay in hostile working environments so that we can pay the bills and feed our children.

What are the most common manifestations of Bullying in the workplace?

- Circulating gossip and half-truths
- Using positional power to humiliate, undermine and abuse others
- Taking out your moods on others
- Aggressiveness in the form of insulting remarks, swearing, ridicule, teasing, sarcasm and shouting etc.
- Sexual harassment, racial discrimination and physical violence

Why are PAs vulnerable?

- Bullying is usually perpetrated by those in power and PAs work closely with management
- They are in a service roles and can be easily and regularly exploited
- The majority of the PAs working today are women (international research shows that they are still being targeted in higher numbers than men, especially single mothers)
- They are part of a culture in the workplace where they are expected to put on a brave face, be discreet and be tough at all times
- They generally have a hard time saying no or speaking out
- PAs are usually the closest, easiest target, much like a spouse.

What do the bullies look like?

- They usually have two faces, the charming and charismatic one they show to the world and another darker, uglier one reserved for their victims
- They are often able to use their position, status or power to get away with bullying the target
- Research has shown that they may have been bullies even as children
- They often abuse not only their staff but their families as well.
- Bullies often recruit others to join them in this activity (those recruited often fear becoming victims themselves)
- They can be bosses, other PAs or colleagues

What is the major impact of bullying?

- Increased absenteeism and the associated cost (not only from the target but also the team at large)
- Stress related illness or depression
- Decrease in self-esteem and loss of morale
- High staff turnover and loss of talent and critical skills (A UK study conducted by Dr. Charlotte Rayner also suggested that you could lose up to 20% of staff who witness regular bullying, not only the victims of bullying)

I am being bullied, what can I do?

Firstly, if at all possible try to find another position or try to be moved to another team within your organization. You need to alert your HR team to the problem, not only for your own sake but for the next PA and the staff remaining behind. If you do not speak out, this situation will persist until someone gets badly hurt. This is highly recommended in the case of physical or sexual abuse.

If leaving your current position is not an option you will need to equip yourself to cope and be safe in this situation (not an easy task at all, but achievable)

Top ten tips to survive a hostile environment:

1. Ensure that you manage the opportunities your bully has to harass you.

Try to avoid being alone with your bully or creating opportunities for them to harass you. Some bullies do their thing in private and some prefer to humiliate you in front of an audience. Try to identify the situations that your bully is prone to use and take evasive measures where possible

2. Document events

Actively gather evidence on your bully. These people often project a very different public image to what you see daily. Make sure that you have proof of what is going on, keep the inappropriate emails and voicemails. It may serve you at a future junction and will at least give you a sense that this is not only happening in your mind.

3. Do not onboard the negative feedback and images that this person is trying to project onto you.

Bullies in my personal experience are people with high rank and low self-esteem. They need to break others down because they themselves feel inadequate. They need to abuse their power to feel good. Remember that they need to insult, shout, be sarcastic and bombard you with negative feedback to validate themselves; you don't have to buy into it.

4. Seek support and talk about it

Bullies rely on and try to ensure that you are, or become as isolated as possible. Take back your power by talking to someone (I would recommend a professional) it can be a friend or a relative. Getting the issues out into the open and getting someone else's view on the situation often validates you and gives you a feeling of support and not being alone.

Often your HR Department already knows that your bully is a problem, there may have been high staff churn in the team or a revolving door of PAs before you. They may not want to get involved or may not be empowered to do so. This is the sad reality of the situation so don't rely on them for the answer or solution but ensure that you are on record.

5. Find ways to detox from the situation

If you cannot escape the situation you will need to find ways of detoxing from it regularly. Hostile work environments will grind you down if you don't. Find something simple that you can do daily or regularly that will assist you to get back to neutral. It can be as simple as taking a long hot bath at the end of the day, developing your spiritual life or getting enough exercise.

6. Build up your own resilience

The happy truth of the matter is, the longer you are in the situation the easier it becomes to deal with. It is the same as developing a callous. You do need to realize however that playing the victim will not get you there. You need to embrace the fact that you can choose. Due to your circumstances you cannot perhaps choose to leave this job but you can choose to retain your dignity and self-esteem. Your bully cannot take those things from you; they need to be given, so make a choice to grow at this time of adversity. Remember that this too shall pass!

7. Remember your past success

The bully may try to convince you that you are useless and incompetent, but take a moment to think back. There have been bosses who were happy with your work. You have succeeded in the past. You have done good work and created things of worth. It is part of the human condition to accept criticism more easily than a compliment. Ensure that you retain perspective by thinking back to a time when you felt like a winner.

8. Realize that it is not you, it is the bully who is the problem

Bullies always try to make you feel like it is your fault; you have done something to deserve this treatment. Rest assured that you have not. They are trying to justify their own behavior. You are not the problem and no one deserves to be victimized at work.

9. Monitor your emotional and physical well being

Keep an eye on the health of your body and your mind. Seek the assistance of your doctor or a counselor if you need to. Ensure that you get enough sleep and guard against depression and high blood pressure. No job is worth your health so make sure that you are looking after yourself!

10. Don't join in bullying

Bullies often get others to join in. These people are often good people but fear being bullied themselves. Don't be this person! If you can speak out or assist a target of bullying please do so. Bullying often persists and goes unchecked because good people turn a blind eye.

Bullying in the workplace is reality and many of us have experienced this first hand and as a survivor of intense bullying myself I can assure you that it takes time to heal but makes you a stronger, more resilient person in the long run. The most important thing is not to lose hope!

During the time I myself was being bullied I came across a blog written under the pen name of Eva James (she also wrote a book) entitled "Bullied by the Boss". I found some of the incidents so familiar and could relate to this material in so many ways. This made me realize that I am not alone, many others are going through this and many, many more have survived and thrived!

In conclusion some wonderful advice from Seth Godin

"The way to work with a bully is to take the ball and go home. First time, every time. When there's no ball, there's no game. Bullies hate that. So they'll either behave so they can play with you or they'll go bully someone else."