

by Bryan Jaffe

Bullies in the Workplace

A Real Problem with Real Effects

ABOUT 54 MILLION AMERICANS HAVE EXPERIENCED BULLYING AT THEIR WORKPLACE, according to data collected by the Workplace Bullying Institute and *Psychology Today*. This number represents more than one-third of the U.S. workforce and underscores how widespread the problem is.

One factor contributing to this number could be the lack of awareness that a problem exists. As with ADHD, many people believe that bullying only affects children and has no impact once they grow into adulthood. While this myth has largely been refuted for ADHD, now recognized as a lifespan disorder, the same cannot be said of bullying. Even those who experience workplace bullying may not recognize it for what it is. This is more problematic for adults with ADHD, who may tend to take criticism personally, and thus must distinguish between legitimate feedback on work performance and bullying.

Michelle [name changed] was bullied so severely by a coworker that she eventually resigned from an organization that employed her for seventeen years. “I’ve never heard of it in those words or terms—workplace bullying,” Michelle told *Attention*. “It was always called workplace politics, or something like that.” The mother of two children with ADHD, she currently serves as coordinator of a CHADD chapter. Thinking back on her ordeal still makes her uncomfortable today, nearly ten years later.

What is workplace bullying?

The Workplace Bullying Institute defines bullying as “a systematic campaign of interpersonal destruction that jeopardizes your health, your career, the job you once loved. Bullying is a non-physical, non-homicidal form of violence and, because it is violent and abusive, emotional harm frequently results.”

Specifically, bullying can be “repeated, health-harming mistreatment of one or more persons (the targets) by one or more perpetrators that takes one or more of the following forms:

- Verbal abuse
- Offensive conduct/behaviors (including nonverbal) which are threatening, humiliating, or intimidating
- Work interference—sabotage—which prevents work from getting done.”

WBI lists “psychological violence, psychological harassment, personal harassment... emotional abuse at work” as synonyms with this definition.

After fifteen years at her job, Michelle found herself in a new position with a new coworker who also served as her supervisor. Despite her seniority in the organization, Mike [name changed] was able to turn the tables and make Michelle feel like an unwanted outsider.

“The first year was fine, we were doing great,” Michelle said. “The second year, his behavior toward me changed.” She described a series of errors Mike

made that antagonized clients. “He [began] doing things that were not appropriate. I tried talking to him about it and he became belligerent and defensive.” After several unsuccessful attempts to address her concerns with Mike directly, Michelle went to their senior supervisor to see what could be done. “[She] heard what I had to say and told me, ‘you have to work it out with him,’” Michelle said.

Michelle was not the only person who had noticed problems with Mike’s interactions with clients. She recalls that a meeting was scheduled to discuss those issues. “People had been questioning what was going on. The morning of the meeting... there was [our senior supervisor] sitting with him and chumming it up,” she said. “The meeting was canceled.”

Learning that others also had concerns did not change the senior supervisor’s instructions to work out the conflict with Mike directly. “Things were getting so bad, it felt like he was trying to push my buttons and bait me,” she recalls. “I was going home at night so stressed I was shaking.”

Michelle’s experiences are not unique. Most workplaces have no policies in place, and there are no federal or state laws with language specific to bullying at work. Workplace bullies can be a boss (manager or supervisor) or a coworker. Bullying is not limited to any particular level or station within the workplace. The victims may be young and inexperienced, or they may be accomplished veterans.

While bullying may resemble harassment, it generally does not meet the legal definitions associated with the term, leaving many without legal recourse. Attorney Renea Saade writes in *Seattle Business*, “While ‘hostile workplace’ and ‘hostile work environment’ are common phrases, few circumstances meet the legal definition required.” She explained that most hostile work environment situations arise under state and federal laws dealing with discrimination and harassment in the workplace.

Isolated and alone

One key feature of workplace bullying is an attempt to isolate the targeted person from coworkers, making the target feel alone. This isolation can be compounded by the social challenges adults with ADHD face when forming or maintaining workplace relationships.

Michelle described a feeling of increasing isolation as her situation festered. “There were things [Mike] said to me that were hurtful,” she said. “He said that no one at [work] liked me and that they all talked about how ridiculous I was behind my back. That took the wind out of my sails—that was the one thing he said that I believed. Everything else I could have ig-

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nored,” Michelle said. “I felt like people were saying things about me that were not true. This is the thing that stuck with me after all these years and has changed me. I have a hard time trusting anybody now, even my friends. It’s affected all my relationships.”

Mike once threatened to have her fired. “I thought, ‘can he do that?’ Well, he was chummy with our boss, and she refused to get involved, telling me to work it out with him on my own, so maybe he could.”

Because of the constant stress and conflict, and the feeling that everyone was ganging up against her behind her back, Michelle eventually quit her job. The management staff had undergone a complete turnover during the last two to three years of her seventeen-year tenure, and she did not receive the support she needed. She made one final attempt to get the senior supervisor involved and was again told to work it out on her own.

This is only one example of workplace bullying. It can be difficult for someone in the situation to see what is happening. For adults with ADHD, it can be even harder to tell, as social cues may be missed. After a lifetime of being criticized for underachieving, to a person with ADHD even sincere, well-meaning criticism can come across as something more sinister. Someone with ADHD must take special care to discern the nature of criticism and figure out if it is legitimate work evaluation or if it crosses the line into the realm of bullying behavior. Sometimes, speaking directly with the person making criticisms can clear things up.

Another strategy that can help is to ask one or more trusted coworkers to look over an assignment or task before submitting it. Getting this feedback from trusted sources may help give a clearer picture of what works, and what needs to be improved.

What is the impact of workplace bullying?

Studies suggest that workplace bullying costs businesses more than \$200 billion per year. Victims are likely to feel fearful, anxious, and depressed. *Psychology Today* cites a study showing that “workers stressed by bullying have performed fifty percent worse on cognitive tests.” Additionally, the higher levels of stress workplace bullying causes can lead to increased physical illness, higher absentee rates and higher turnover rates.

Psychology Today reported in May 2011 that “A study by Dr. Noreen Tehrani, who counseled victims of violence in Northern Ireland, and soldiers returning from overseas combat and victims of workplace bullying, concluded that bullying exhibited similar psychological and physical symptoms—nightmares and extreme anxiety, and a variety of physical ailments.”

Workplace bullying can make a victim’s entire life miserable. Michelle experienced this firsthand, as she was physically shaken by her ordeal. Even after quitting, it took time for her to get over the worst of it. “I could not sleep at night, my whole body would shake,” Michelle said. “I feared for my safety because [Mike] had my number and my home address. About eight years later I finally saw a therapist about it because it had affected all my relationships for all those years. Thankfully, my husband was very supportive through the entire thing.”

Bullying does not simply vanish when people reach adulthood. It does not cease to exist when the final speech is given at high school graduation. Bullies come in all sizes and ages and are found in all walks of life. Increasing employer awareness of the existence of bullying at work is only the first step in addressing the problem. Employers must be made aware of the negative impacts bullying has on productivity, morale, and employee health and retention. While some organizations will address such problems once they are known, others will need a clear illustration of the losses bullying incurs before acting.

For adults with ADHD, who may already feel separated from coworkers due to social challenges, bullying may be even more effective as they present easier targets for workplace bullies. Michelle’s senior supervisor “would not let me say one word about the problems. She would not even listen to what the situation was,” she recalls. “The bullying makes you feel so alienated and alone that it perpetuates it. That’s how they get away with doing it, because they make you feel so powerless.” 

What can I do if I think I’m being bullied at work?

The Workplace Bullying Institute (workplacebullying.org) has a three-step plan to address workplace bullying, which includes giving it a name to legitimize it, taking time away to heal and make preparations, and finally to expose the bully to the business and make a case for removal. These steps may prove challenging to an adult affected by ADHD. With that in mind, here are some ADHD-friendly suggestions:

- Speak with the bully in a calm and professional manner. When addressing the bully, it can be especially difficult to maintain composure. Many with ADHD have impulse control challenges and poor emotional self-regulation. Direct confrontation will not be effective if you cannot remain cool and collected. It may help to confide in a trusted friend and role-play the discussion, allowing you to get a sense of how the conversation may go and what curveballs may be thrown. The more prepared you are, the better a confrontation is likely to go.
 - Notify your supervisor of the problem (and, if different, the bully’s supervisor) or speak with someone in HR.
 - Bullies often try to undermine their victim’s self-esteem. Adults with ADHD, who have faced a number of failures and difficulties with what many people consider “simple” tasks, are particularly susceptible to this. Some with ADHD may have spent much of their childhood with the “underachiever” label, or being told they are lazy and need to apply themselves.
- The self-doubts that can arise from this can be long-lasting, and a bully can exploit these feelings. One great way to prevent this is to work hard and do your job well—don’t let the bully win by dragging your work down. Doing good work speaks for itself. Be mindful of successes and progress made, and do not compare yourself to others. Be the best YOU can be.
- Watch out for attempts to cut you off from colleagues. Make sure you keep your workplace relationships healthy and active.
 - Working hard can go a long way, but only if that work is remembered. Since people with ADHD can have difficulties with recollection, have a system in place to keep written records of what is accomplished. Saving the email chains can illustrate your contributions to collaborative projects. A daily written log of completed tasks can help keep track of accomplishments as well. The National Resource Center on ADHD (help4adhd.org) offers the information sheet What We Know #16: *Succeeding in the Workplace for Adults with ADHD*.

Employers may not see the upside of dealing with bullying, especially if the bully produces short-term success. Get the facts about workplace bullying and be ready to make your case. If all else fails, your best option may be to find a new job in a better workplace. If an employer does not see bullying as a real problem to be addressed, do you wish to remain in that environment?