

Workplace bullying can be connected to suicidal thoughts: Study

HR, managers first line of defence to prevent escalation of victimization

BY LIZ BERNIER

TARGETS of workplace bullying may be more likely to contemplate suicide, according to a Norwegian study of 1,850 workers conducted over a five-year period. Workers tracked during the study became about twice as likely to report thoughts of suicide after being victims of such behaviour.

If you think about it, it's not that surprising workplace bullying can have such a profound impact on an individual's mental health, said Morten Birkeland Nielsen, a professor at the University of Bergen in Norway and lead author of the study.

"Work is extremely important for us. As the average worker spends much of his or her waking time at the workplace, work represents a significant area in life for most employees," he said.

"Hence, being exposed to bullying or other forms for mistreatment at work may be detrimental in many ways."

The study is notable because the few other studies that exist on the subject failed to survey respondents over varying points in time, said Nielsen.

"The few studies that exist have used cross-sectional research designs which means that variables have been surveyed at one single time point, and it has not been possible to determine whether bullying is an antecedent or consequence of suicidal ideation," he said.

"We examined the relationship

between workplace bullying and suicidal ideation... over three time-points and a five-year period."

Inside the mind of a target

So how do targets of workplace bullying start down the slope from relative mental health to suicidal ideation?

They often begin to feel hopeless, said Lisa Barrow, Toronto-based business consultant and assistant professor at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ont.

"Depending on the situation, they may not feel as though the workplace bullying is going to end. And along with feeling hopeless, a lot of targeted people experienced what is called learned helplessness," she said.

"With learned helplessness, they feel as if they are not in control of the situation, they feel as if they have to continue to put up with the bullying. Maybe the bully is the boss and the individual needs the job, so they may feel as if they are in a catch-22 and can't really do anything about it. So they (develop) learned helplessness."

Sometimes, a targeted individual won't even realize he is being "bullied," per se — he just knows people have started treating him differently, said Barrow.

The target often begins to feel hopeless, helpless and isolated.

"A targeted person is often socially and physically isolated from others, and this is the way the bully

manipulates relationships. So you add all those experiences together and sometimes individuals feel so helpless that they believe that the only option they have is suicide," said Barrow.

The individual may feel as if no one understands her or she's not getting the support from her employer or human resources, she said.

"Oftentimes, people will go to human resources with concerns of bullying and their concerns are dismissed — sometimes they are told it is just a 'personality conflict,'" said Barrow. "I don't believe that employers know the depth of how (workplace bullying) can impact a targeted person."

It's not all in her head

Though the mental health consequences are very real and very significant, there are often other consequences for a targeted individual as well, said Valerie Cade, Calgary-based workplace bullying expert and author of *Bully Free at Work*.

And instead of seeking help, a victim will often try to downplay, hide or minimize those consequences.

"There's so much pressure on a person to be professional, to do their job, to minimize anything that would make them look less than strong and capable, because strong and capable gets promoted, gets listened to, gets included. So a target will try to minimize what's happening. And if you deny what's really

happening to you, it just builds up."

Those consequences have been examined in a number of studies, said Nielsen.

"Psychological distress, in the form of increased levels of anxiety and depression, seems to be a very common health problem among those targeted. Many studies have also established somatic complaints as a potential consequence of bullying. Common somatic complaints are muscle-skeletal disorders and headache," he said.

"There are also some studies which have shown a clear association between exposure to bullying and symptoms that resemble post-traumatic stress disorder."

Other physical ailments may manifest as well, said Jacqueline Power, assistant professor at the University of Windsor in Ontario, and an expert on workplace bullying.

"A higher rate of cardiac or heart disease (is a potential consequence); so is greater anxiety, more days missed from work, perhaps because they're looking for jobs, perhaps because they're hiding at home, perhaps because they're not sleeping well; so sleep disorders are a big problem. Also skin disorders — people who are under a lot of stress tend to develop rashes, so that's quite a common thing."

Studies have shown there can also be spillover effects on the person's relationships, said Nielsen.

"Bullying is related to increased

problems in marital life and family. In many cases, we see that victims of bullying withdraw from family life, something which can have profound negative effects for spouses and children.”

Managers, HR first line of defence

Despite the laundry list of serious, detrimental consequences, workplace bullying is often still downplayed, said Cade.

“Most employers (often) invalidate things like this. It’s pretty hard to put yourself in (the target’s) square... they almost get paralyzed because they don’t know how to solve it, so they tend to discount or dismiss or deny it.”

But employers can’t keep downplaying the impacts of bullying when suicide can be a result, she said.

“The more that suicide situations

are published, as awful as that is, it does bring to light the severity.”

Managers should not only be aware of the issue in theory, but should also keep an eye out for changes in an employee’s behaviour or unexplained turnover, said Power.

“If you can’t explain why you’ve got turnover, bullying would be something to start looking into,” she said.

HR needs to be properly trained on how to handle a complaint of bullying — and it needs to follow through on that training, said Barrow.

“From the employer standpoint, it’s important when someone presents in human resources and says that he or she is being bullied, it is critical for whoever is taking that complaint to not dismiss it — to listen to the individual, to start an investigation immediately,” she said.

It’s also critical to implement corrective action measures so the individual doesn’t feel she is fighting this battle alone, said Barrow.

Managers and supervisors need to be able to empathize with targets of bullying, said Cade — to share and identify with someone else’s situation.

“(‘Empathize’ is) a good word that everyone knows about and they think that they’re empathetic when they’re being polite, but empathy is much more — it’s not just your behaviour, it’s what you believe too,” she said.

In fairness to managers, bullying can be a challenging issue to address, particularly if they don’t work directly with the employee, said Cade.

“More and more, we’re seeing managers and supervisors who don’t work directly with those who

report to them — so it’s kind of hard to be able to see (these issues). So a great manager or supervisor will be approachable and they will constantly verbalize, ‘Hey, if there are any challenges or problems, my door’s always open,’” she said.

After putting that invitation out there, managers should follow through by making themselves available in a timely way if someone does approach them.

But it’s important to be careful to avoid labelling or diagnosing a person with a mental health issue, said Cade.

“The label they would rather use is ‘bullying’ because that’s the way in which they see it. They don’t see it as ‘I have a mental health issue.’ The bully might be the one with a mental health issue,” she said.

“With empathy, we want to totally identify with what the target is saying — not psychoanalyze them.”