



Workplace Bullying Exists In Social Work:
sadly our silence enables the abuse to continue.
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Two of many definitions available world wide:

- *Workplace bullying is usually seen as acts or verbal comments that could 'mentally' hurt or isolate a person in the workplace. Sometimes, bullying can involve negative physical contact as well. Bullying usually involves repeated incidents or a pattern of behaviour that is intended to intimidate, offend, degrade or humiliate a particular person or group of people. It has also been described as the assertion of power through aggression.(CCOHS)*
- *"Bullying is a compulsive need to displace aggression and is achieved by the expression of inadequacy (social, personal, interpersonal, behavioural, professional) by projection of that inadequacy onto others through control and subjugation (criticism, exclusion, isolation etc). Bullying is sustained by abdication of responsibility (denial, counter-accusation, pretence of victimhood) and perpetuated by a climate of fear, ignorance, indifference, silence, denial, disbelief, deception, evasion of accountability, tolerance and reward for the bully." (Tim Field, 1999)*

As a social worker with over 25 yrs of experience in many different areas, you may be shocked by the number of stories I have either witnessed and/or experienced personally as a target of bullying. I began specializing in this area in 2011 and since then I have spoken with hundreds of social workers (male and female) all over the world who have experienced bullying in their workplaces. Whether the targets are working in various areas of front line social work i.e.: high case loads with multi-dynamic crisis orientated cases, or in leadership positions, the stories I have heard exist in your workplaces.

In 2011, I hit rock bottom as a medical social worker employed in a Cancer Care Centre. I was providing supports and resources to numerous cancer patients and their family members, and I was enduring very complex mobbing tactics over a period of 4 years. **Mobbing** is defined by Leymann 1996 as, "hostile and unethical communication which is directed in a systematic manner by two or more individuals, mainly toward one individual". At the time I was working in a multi-disciplinary team of social workers, psychologists, pastoral care, nurses, and oncologists. My offenders were from the first three professions noted.

When I began to specialize in this area I was shocked and overwhelmed by the number of people who came forward to share their stories. I became very concerned about the silence and isolation social workers suffer in addition to high case loads. Isolation is one tactic used by someone who bullies to oppress their target. Targets will isolate in order to feel safe, avoid abuse, and attempt to function in their job. Over the past 3 years I have delivered my workshops to many social workers in Alberta and the USA. This has allowed me to collect themes from consistent reports during discussions, phone calls and private meetings with social workers. I have also developed a few myths about the social workers experience of WPB. I have come to believe that social workers will experience additional shame and humiliation stemming from societies expectations placed upon us. After all we are trained to be the experts who identify, prevent, intervene and treat persons who experience various forms of abuse. How could we possibly miss the fact that we are seeing it and/or experiencing it in our own work environment? How could we look the other way when a colleague is in need? How could we possibly talk about this? In reality, all of this speaks to the level of insidiousness with workplace bullying. It is vital that you increase your knowledge in this subject.

Workplace bullying (WPB) affects all ages, all cultures, communities, and all professions. There tends to be confusion around definitions, terminology, and many assumptions made in regards to this abuse. I cannot count the times that I have heard educated professionals make comments to this affect: "I would never let it happen to me" or, "well I am too strong to let that happen" or, "it never happened because I am assertive". This isn't about a choice or about the target lacking in skill, strength, or ability to stand up for themselves. In fact these statements blame the target and could cause further harm to someone who is already feeling comprised.

WPB is a very complex form of abuse which involves the 'abuse of power'. Power most often is seen in leadership roles, but it can also be people who are more aggressive, popular, and/or have more seniority. **Lateral Violence** is a form of bullying which involves peer to peer situations. It is not possible for me to cover the numerous complex layers involved with WPB in this short article. What I can say is that "over time with an accumulation of subtle abusive tactics (passive aggressive forms of abuse), eventually the target will feel voiceless, hopeless and trapped". Especially if witnesses (bystanders) choose not to become involved and/or look the other way. This sense of betrayal and abandonment adds to the already damaged self esteem and sense of safety for targets of bullying.

After two years of fighting for my rights and working with my union representative I was becoming physically ill and an emotional wreck. My Union Rep completed a weekend conference of training on workplace bullying and yet still did not identify what was happening to me. When I came to realize that I was being bullied, I asked my Union Rep why he had not thrown me a life jacket by explaining what he had learned at this conference 6 months prior. I told him he could have helped me understand the trauma I was experiencing. He replied, "Linda, social workers do not bullying, if they did it would be rare, and you guys would just fix it". This statement solidified my future choice of expertise. His innocent lack of knowledge (though educated during this conference) opened my eyes to the risks involved for social workers. People make dangerous assumptions about this abuse. The expectation is that social workers are beyond this behavior. How can society take us seriously and support us appropriately if we are caught in a cycle of shame which likely stems from the expectations and assumptions placed upon us?

We must educate the public about this abuse and the fact that social workers are human beings first.

Like all others experiencing WPB, social workers fear that their perpetrator of bullying will damage their reputations. Some have experienced verbal or subtle threats to this nature. We fear the loss of our careers, dreams and goals and more importantly, we fear the loss of our livelihood. I lost count of how many times I heard my supervisor and manager state "if you do not like your job leave". It is never this easy. Perhaps we love our work and more obviously, many of us have families who depend on us for medications, treatment and the bills to be paid. In most cases many transfer out, take temporary secondment positions, return to school, or resign. And many have valid reasons for holding out as long as possible. It is important to acknowledge that everyone has their own personal issues which may or may not affect how we react to abuse in the workplace i.e.: avoid, deny, withdraw, negative, develop anxiety or, become angry, abrasive, abusive to avoid being abused. A commitment for self care, self protection and healing must be made whether justice is achieved or not.

Why do people bully? There is a gap in the research due to lack of people coming forward and offering their stories about why they bully others. No doubt there are some who are in complete denial, or lack self insight, or even lack empathy. But I do believe there are many who wish to understand their own behaviours. They too have stories that would help us all gain some compassion and understanding. I believe we need to create an environment of safety and support to help people who bully others. This abuse will not be fully resolved without all persons involved gaining insight, skills and healing.

Examples of why some people bully:

- Bullied by others as children and/or they were exposed to other forms of abuse in their lives i.e.: domestic violence, children of parents suffering from substance addictions. "Children who witness violence in the home are at a higher risk of being bullied and becoming a bully in the schools and in the workplace" (Kothari).
- Trained to use aggression and maintain control of their workplace and some do receive promotions. There are employers who reward and encourage this form of leadership.
- Psychopath or sociopath.
- Untreated or poorly treated mental illness i.e.: depression, borderline personality disorder, bi-polar, addictions and/or burnout.

Hidden agendas i.e.: seeking promotions, hiding affairs in the workplace, or vengeful reactions to rejection of sexual advances. *I know of two male social workers who experienced bullying from their female supervisors (non social workers) after they rejected sexual advances.*

It is important to say that social workers work with multi-disciplinary teams. Most of the stories I have heard from social workers abused in the workplace are cases where their abusers were not trained social workers.

Bullying is not a new phenomenon. This behavior has been a part of all societies since the beginning of time. Unfortunately today we are seeing far more sophisticated methods of bullying, especially with our growing social media options available to them. Sadly we are seeing an increase in suicide and/or homicide cases related to bullying. I believe we are so conditioned to inappropriate behaviours that we miss what is happening directly in front of us. Please see my website for questionnaires that demonstrate bullying behaviours and/or the targets experience.

Tips for Social Workers To Address WPB:

- 1) Review your code of ethics. If you have knowledge of abuse, you must report it.
- 2) Know your workplace policies and procedures around WPB and your employers complaint processes. If this does not exist, advocate for this to be addressed. Become a part of the team that develops your departments processes.
- 3) Invite someone to provide an in-service or workplace on WPB. Gain knowledge.
- 4) Create a Notice Board for your office with information about WPB. This will act as a reminder of your office commitment, and an ongoing knowledge builder.
- 5) Do not make assumptions or potentially hurtful comments dismissing and/or minimizing this abuse. This makes you part of the problem not the solution.
- 6) If you suspect you are a target, bystander or someone who has a tendency to bully others, see someone who is knowledgeable in this area for a consult and/or counselling. All sides have an important story to share. All sides deserve support.
- 7) Gather your supports, see your doctor to monitor your stress levels and health. Self care means taking breaks, limiting overtime, rest, diet, exercise and laughter.
- 8) Targets and bystanders need to keep detailed records reporting facts only.
- 9) Advocate to your Professional Assoc., Union, Faculties and Workplace for safety, education, prevention and supportive resources.
- 10) Listen, validate, and offer what you can to support your colleagues. Be realistic with what support you can and cannot offer. Make promises you can keep.
- 11) Address your own barriers. For example: if you are a target or a bystander and you fear have a of conflict which prevents you from stopping this abuse, you have a responsibility to yourself, your colleagues and clients, to heal this barrier.
- 12) Research and publish your own work on this subject. Our profession suffers a lack of research in this area. We have a great deal of work to do.
- 13) You have resources and networks you connect with regularly. Share and teach about WPB whenever and to whoever you can. Advocate and/or lobby for policies and for legislation. Many of you have powerful contacts.
- 14) Find a way to share your story, start talking about what you see, hear and have experienced. Let us all break the silence and walk the talk we give our clients.

Who advocates for the advocate? It is time that we do! We all have a part in creating this change. I admit that I am bias when I say that "social workers are the most resourceful and equipped profession to competently address the world wide epidemic of bullying experienced at all ages". Think about the tools, networks and connections you have accumulated in your career. I can confidently state if an client came in to your office asking for help with their situation of bullying in the workplace, you would research it and find resources for them. If you couldn't find any resources you would advocate for supports and/or create them yourself. Do the same for yourself and for each other. Social workers can collaborate world wide and share our abundance of skills, knowledge and creative problem solving techniques. See my website for more free information, tips, resources, stories about social workers and other professionals, and videos on various forms of bullying.

Let this knowledge bring you positive power in your workplace.

Feel free to contact me for more information, questions, concerns, or confidentially share your story.

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