



RESEARCH STUDIES

workplacebullying.org

2013 WBI Survey

Bullied Targets Discover Workplace Bullying

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**BULLIED TARGETS DISCOVER
WORKPLACE BULLYING
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At WBI over the years, we have been called by nearly 10,000 individuals seeking answers to their questions about their irrational and destructive workplace bullying experiences. In our 3-step Target Action Plan, the first step begins with an acknowledgment that the abusive conduct was perpetrated by others external to themselves. That step typically is the first time a name is given to the assaults that comprise bullying.

Corrective actions all depend on that initial recognition. In this survey we asked targets of, and witnesses to, the bullying to describe the timing of the recognition of the label for their experiences and its source.

WBI conducts several online surveys each year. Those surveys rely upon self-selected samples of individuals bullied at work because those are the people who visit a website with “workplace bullying” in its name. Site visitors are seeking answers to their personal dilemma caused by bullying. Though this survey is one of those non-scientific surveys, its results can accurately depict the perceptions of workers targeted for bullying at work as contrasted with the views of all adult Americans in our scientific national surveys.

A total of 562 respondents completed this “Discovery” survey during the summer of 2013.

The *questions* and proportions for each response are found below. Two demographic profile questions opened the survey.

What is your gender?

.86 *Female*

.14 *Male*

The WBI online survey respondents are typically over 80% women, 86% in this case.

Consider the scenario when an employee’s ability to perform her or his job is interfered with by one or more people who engage in repeated intimidation, threats, humiliation, sabotage of productivity, or verbal abuse? What is your experience?

.49 *It is happening to me now*

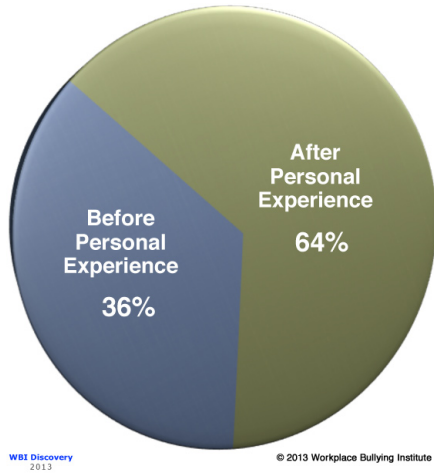
.48 *It happened to me in my work life, but not now*

.03 *I have only witnessed it happening to others; it never happened to me*

The 3 respondents who answered “*I have not seen or heard it myself*” were eliminated from analyses.

Thus, 97% of respondents have been directly bullied. The other 3% have witnessed it.

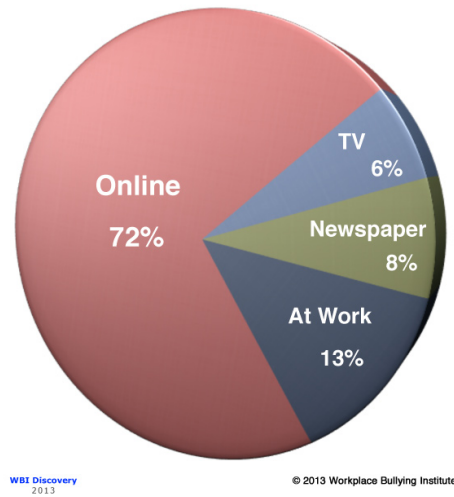
If you were a target or a witness (a, b, or c, above), when were you first able to identify incidents of abusive conduct as workplace bullying? (n = 541)



- .64 *After my personal experience*
- .36 *Before my personal experience*

Where did you first hear the term “workplace bullying”?

- .72 *Online*
- .13 *At work*
- .08 *Newspaper or magazine interview*
- .06 *TV*



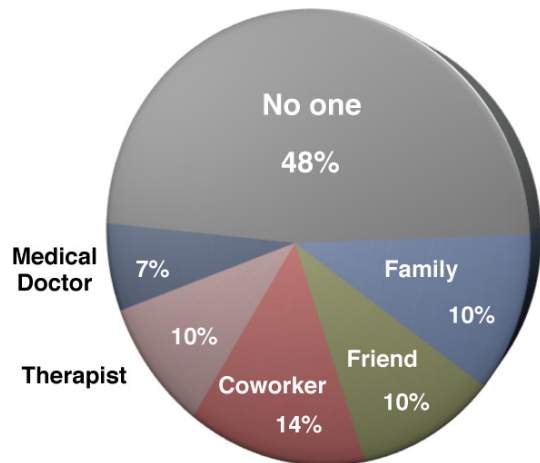
How did you discover the details about workplace bullying and its effects?



- .82 *Reading online*
- .06 *Others approached me to discuss it*
- .04 *Asking others about their experiences with workplace bullying*
- .03 *Off-site training*
- .02 *I only know the term and don't know the details*
- .02 *On-site training*

If others helped you discover workplace bullying, who helped the most?

.48	<i>N/A</i>
.14	<i>Coworker</i>
.10	<i>Family member</i>
.10	<i>Friend</i>
.10	<i>Therapist</i>
.07	<i>Medical Doctor</i>



WBI Discovery
2013

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Discussion

At WBI, in our work with thousands of bullied targets, most targets report being completely surprised and shocked to discover they are victims of abuse. The question about the timing of the discovery of the term workplace bullying - being able to externalize the problem and understand that targets are not responsible for the instigation of bullying - explains the surprise. For most targets (64.3%) labeling of the experience is delayed. Delay exacerbates bullying related stress and postpones taking steps to reverse the situation.

Our analyses led us to search for different patterns when each of the variables was crossed with all of the others. For instance, respondents who reported being currently bullied said in greater numbers (40.6%) that they were aware that they were being bullied from the start. Whereas respondents who were previously bullied had a lower likelihood (30.8%) of correctly identifying their experience. Erroneous labels for the experience center around self-blame.

The experiences of respondents did not affect where they learned the term workplace bullying. The vast majority (72.6%) discovered it online. Coworkers were a good source of information about what workplace bullying for targets (13.4%). Unfortunately the information did not precede the incidents, so there was no warning. Nor was there much sharing at the onset of the bullying (67.6% of coworker help came late). Noteworthy is the finding that only 1.6% of respondents said their employers educated them about workplace bullying. Clearly much work is left to do with employers.

There are qualitative differences between being currently bullied and having survived previous bullying with respect to receiving help. Of course the act of receiving help from these various sources can be explained by the bullied targets' decision to seek help. Interpreting the results as a function of sources of help solicited by targets explains how confused, distracted, and mired in emotional distress currently bullied targets are. In that state, individuals are either incapable of, or unwilling to, ask for help.

Therefore, therapists end up being more helpful for targets whose bullying had ended (64.9%) than for targets being currently bullied (35.1%). Currently bullied targets report receiving, or asking for help from no one. Of all the sources of help for respondents being currently bullied, isolation describes the situation for 53.1% of respondents. And compared to previously bullied targets, those currently bullied are more isolated (54.9%) than the former group (45.1%).

Online Paradox

As the study shows, bullied targets tend to rely upon the internet (72.6%), more than any other source, to first discover the term workplace bullying, and subsequently, details of its effects on their lives. Online learning happened irrespective of personal experience with bullying. This finding is bolstered by a previous WBI study (2011-IP-E) in which targets considered social media to play a positive role in their understanding of workplace bullying. As the producers of a workplace bullying informational website that enjoys high search engine rankings, we are proud to indirectly help bullied targets.

The bad news from the findings in this study is that respondents who first discovered bullying online reported receiving no help from anyone in 79% of the cases. A more dismal finding is that respondents who either received help from no one, or did not seek help from another person relied mostly (89.8%) on the internet for details about bullying.

The convenience and anonymity of the internet seems to provide reasons for bullied targets who may initially be reluctant to seek help out of personal shame to continue their disconnection from other human beings who could help. It is a paradox that may bring personal health consequences. Social isolation and exclusion create high levels of distress. The illusion of safety from interacting with a digital source may deny requisite human contact. The question arises if *virtual* connections are sufficient to satisfy the human need for belongingness.

Conclusions

- The internet is a bullied target's primary source of information.
- Paradoxically isolation accompanies a reliance upon the internet for targets who are bullied at work - currently and previously.
- In addition to the reluctance of, or inability to, have peers help bullied targets worsen their situations by not asking for help. The degree of personal shame can partly explain this result.
- Sadly, when bullied targets can most benefit from counseling, during the most acute phases of bullying, only one-third seek help from a therapist.
- Employers do not provide training in workplace bullying so that employees can recognize bullying when it happens to them or coworkers.

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