



RESEARCH STUDIES

workplacebullying.org

**The WBI Website
2013 Instant Poll - E
Mental Health Professionals' Grasp
of Workplace Bullying**

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MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS' GRASP OF WORKPLACE BULLYING WBI 2013-E Instant Poll

Individuals targeted for bullying have trouble being believed. At work, many of the disbelievers have the incentive to blame the victim, either to bolster their own sense of power or to distance themselves from the pain associated with an empathic response. Prior WBI research confirms that family and friends are the primary sources of emotional support.

Prior WBI research also found that over 70% of bullied targets reported seeking treatment from a mental health professional. An understanding therapist is essential for effective treatment. Misunderstanding, or ignorance about, the impact of abusive mistreatment at work can lead to an improper diagnosis and ineffective treatment. At worst, a therapist who does not understand the effects a toxic work environment can have on individual clients, may overestimate the target-client's ability to reverse her or his fate. An effective therapist will be familiar with trauma and can best characterize the bullied target's experience as a response to violence.

WBI Instant Polls are online single-question surveys that rely upon self-selected samples of individuals bullied at work (typically 98% of any sample). No demographic data are collected. Our non-scientific Instant Polls 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 206 target-respondents completed our survey. Twenty-eight respondents answered "N/A: I've never sought or received psychological treatment" and were removed leaving a sample of 178.

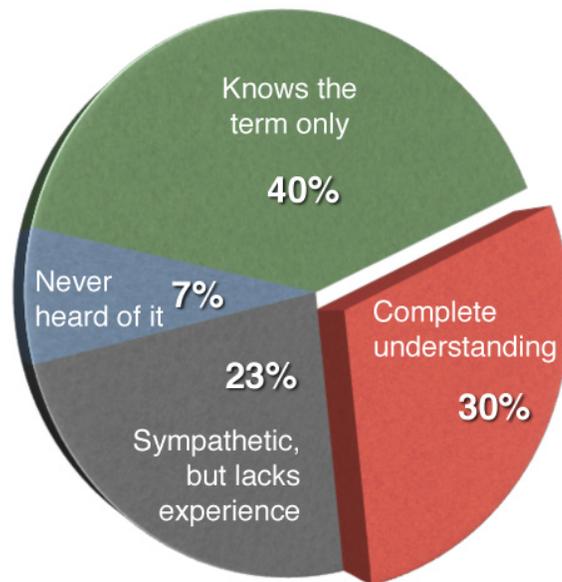
We asked the question:

How would you characterize your therapist/counselor/psychologist/psychiatrist's understanding of workplace bullying?

Percentages of each response were:

- .297 *Complete understanding of abusive conduct, work environments & the harm bullying has caused me*
- .230 *Sympathetic, understands the role of employer, but lacks necessary experience to help me change the system*
- .404 *Knows the term only, but focuses on what I must change about myself, nothing else*
- .067 *Unfamiliar with term & resistant to my efforts to educate on the phenomenon*

Though 30% of therapists were fully cognizant about workplace bullying, an additional 23% deserve credit for providing targeted individual clients with a "safe harbor," in which they were not ridiculed or humiliated. Therefore, it's safe to say that targets have 53% chance of being believed by, and safe with, their chosen mental health professional.



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The percentage of therapists who are most likely to commit the “fundamental attribution error” stands at 47%. Specifically, one response choice included the phrase that the therapist “focuses on” changing the target and “nothing else.” Doing so necessarily ignores powerful exigent workplace factors, external to the target, that causes the psychological injuries (and a host of invisible stress-related physiological changes from the exposure to the stress of bullying). These myopic therapists overestimate the target’s ability to counter those situational forces.

Many therapists don’t understand the contemporary workplace except in a stereotypical, superficial way. They completed their graduate education and began work as a therapist. In most clinic settings, they enjoy more autonomy than their bullied clients had. They know supervision, but unless their supervisor was abusive, they were not subjected to daily inescapable domination. As is true with many people in the general public, unless they personally experienced bullying, they do not believe it happens. Therapists are no different.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that approximately 70% of mental health professionals would benefit from further education about workplace bullying. Especially important is for counselors to more fully grasp how workers cannot control several negative aspects of the work environment and how that affects the health and well being of workers who become prospective clients. They can be introduced to the voluminous scientific literature on abusive supervision, workplace bullying and occupational health.

With education, psychotherapists can make more accurate diagnoses and generate more effective solutions for their desperate clients who were bullied at work.

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