

Use caution when helping clients to address workplace bullying

I'm thankful to see workplace bullying mentioned in the April cover story, "Bringing work home." I am the administrator of the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI) and a licensed counselor in private practice. WBI's mission is to understand, prevent and correct all abuse at work.

Did you know 35 percent of the U.S. workforce reports being bullied at work and an additional 15 percent witnesses it? Approximately 53.5 million Americans have directly experienced this form of workplace abuse.

Workplace bullying is a complex, destructive phenomenon that can lead to serious health harm for the bullied individual. Sustained, prolonged exposure to stress at work may result in significant physical, social, economic and emotional injuries. Likewise, the employer faces profoundly negative consequences in the form of unwanted turnover, decreased productivity, absenteeism, risk of litigation, damaged reputation and more.

Once targeted, a person has a 64 percent chance of losing his or her job for no legitimate reason. Despite the health harm, 40 percent of those targeted never report the bullying. Only 3 percent sue, and 4 percent complain to state or federal agencies. Illegal discriminatory conduct plays a role in only 20 percent of bullying cases. Due to the lack of laws specifically addressing workplace bullying, most targets have no recourse.

In the article, David Blustein is correct in recognizing workplace dynamics as a barrier to resolution. For example, when the bully is the boss — as in 72 percent of cases — the individual's options are limited. Both Blustein and Blaise Morrison discuss exploring boundaries and teaching assertive communication skills to clients. They are half correct. Helping clients understand and establish healthy work boundaries is an appropriate treatment goal. However, assertive communication may not be the answer. At WBI, we've found that targets may be further traumatized by assertively approaching the bully. I urge counselors to be cautious about putting clients in this situation.

Remember, workplace dynamics do not cultivate a level playing field, and bullying frequently boils down to issues of power and control. A bully boss can easily misinterpret assertive communication as insubordination, thus fueling additional attacks on the target.

Also, asking clients to change the way they communicate at work may send the message that targets are responsible for being bullied. This is not the case. The bully chooses the target, the timing and the tactics. The organization, not the target, is responsible for intervening and addressing the bullying behavior.

I strongly encourage my fellow counseling professionals to research the phenomenon of workplace bullying before treating clients who present with this concern. The recurring trauma and marked isolation they endure make targets a challenging clinical population. Unfortunately, many times they are misunderstood and misdiagnosed, which may result in unnecessary delays or a complete denial of appropriate therapeutic care. As counselors, we are uniquely positioned to address these concerns, explore realistic solutions, teach effective coping skills and guide our clients toward healthy new beginnings.

Learn more about workplace bullying by visiting the WBI website: workplacebullying.org.

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