



**RESEARCH STUDIES**

*workplacebullying.org*

**The WBI Website  
2014 Instant Poll-D**

**Reversing Emotional Abuse**

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## REVERSING EMOTIONAL ABUSE

### WBI 2014-D Instant Poll

WBI credits friend and researcher Loreleigh Keashly for coining the term Emotional Abuse at Work as synonym for workplace bullying. Her 1998 review of the then-current scientific literature was aptly titled. Bullying always impacts the targeted person's emotional state. The effect is always negative, not positive. In most cases, individuals are either happy or emotionally neutral at work, content to do their jobs. Bullying comes unannounced and uninvited. It compels immediate attention. All of one's cognitive resources are deployed to cope with the psychological assault.

In worst cases, there is trauma that must be dealt with. In all cases, the target is stigmatized and social relations with coworkers strained. At the very least, the onset of bullying is a sad event. The once neutral or happy person is forced into negativity. At the outset, attempts to think "happy, positive thoughts" are overwhelmed by the negative reality imposed by the abuser.

Bullying triggers distress, the human stress response in reaction to the bully's tactics, the stressors. If left unabated, prolonged distress leads to stress-related diseases, all sorts of health complications.

The most effective stress mitigation factor is social support. Validating human support can reverse the deleterious effects of emotional abuse. Isolation exacerbates the distress. Sometimes learning about the first-time experience can alleviate distress. After all, bullying is rather ambiguous when first experienced.

WBI research (WBI IP 2013-H) found that for 33% of bullied targets, their bullying at work was the first abuse ever experienced in their lives. Those people will take the longest to recognize. Only 19% were bullied in school; they may or may not recognize the bullying happening to them at work because they might have expected bullying to have ended with school ending. Sadly, 44% of targets have a prior history with abuse from family experiences. Prior history alone does not guarantee instant recognition and labeling of the emotional abuse happening to them, but their visceral reactions become cues to recognition. They have "been there before" with respect to the emotional negativity; they have known fear, apprehension and anxiety.

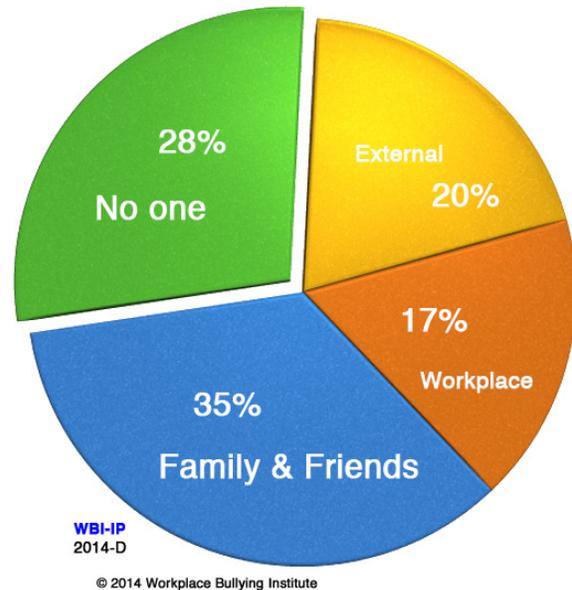
WBI Instant Polls are online single-question surveys that rely upon self-selected samples of individuals bullied at work (typically 98% of any sample). No demographic data are collected. Our non-scientific Instant Polls accurately depict the perceptions of workers targeted for bullying at work as contrasted with the views of all adult Americans in our scientific national surveys.

For this survey, we asked 820 respondents (bullied targets and witnesses) to describe sources of positivity for bullied targets shrouded in negative emotions.

*Question: As a bullied target, who made you feel better, changed your negative emotions to positive or at least less negative?*

The percentages for each response option were:

- .168 *Spouse / Partner*
- .143 *No one was able to make me feel better despite efforts*
- .140 *No one tried to make me feel better*
- .134 *Friends outside work*
- .112 *Counselor or physician*
- .107 *Coworkers - same rank*
- .082 *Websites, books, articles*
- .055 *Coworkers - higher rank*
- .041 *My children*
- .011 *HR*
- .006 *Virtual friends on social media*



We aggregated the various groups into broader categories for a snapshot glance at the sources of emotional support.

Inside the target's personal network are family and friends. Together, they provide the most support to move from negative to positive emotions. As stated above, getting effective support from no one ranks second. External support — both impersonal (websites, social media) and personal (counselors, physicians) — ranked a close third. Finally, the workplace (peers, managers, HR) was the least likely source of emotional support.

WBI has asked targets to identify sources of social support in prior studies. In this survey, we specifically asked who or what contributed to reversing the negative emotions associated with bullying. The results confirm that the most person most likely to do that is the adult spouse or partner, the person who provides the most social support. The top ranking helps define the nature of social support spouses and partners provide. Because they typically share history with the bullied target, they can reinforce the target's self-perception of skills possessed to counter the bully's lies. This survey shows that spouses and partners' support also involves providing the emotional counterweight to the target's negativity. They help restore healthier positive emotions.

The low proportion given to children of bullied targets is not a negative. It is good that targets do not rely on their children for emotional support. Children may inadvertently provide an emotional uplift, but it is too burdensome to require them to do so. Though it is nearly impossible to keep children sheltered from what is happening to the bullied parent at work from children, every attempt should be made to not drag children into the emotional morass that bullying creates.

Friends, like family, have the most opportunities to reverse the emotional plight of targets. Depending on the length of relationships, they can exert a great deal of influence by recalling good times shared in the past to crowd out the dreariness that bullying casts over their friends' lives. It was a surprise to see friends outside work ranked lower than the "no one" categories. This suggests that the negativity that overcomes bullied friends can scare away friends who do not want to empathically feel the same. Bullying creates distance between friends just when targets need support the most.

In this survey, the two categories of "no one" are ranked second. This means that for 28% of targets, no one successfully offset the negative emotions from bullying. For half of that group, the reason was the dominance of the negativity over someone's attempt to get the target into a positive mood. It probably speaks more to the power of bullying rather than the failure of others' attempts to make something positive out of something so dark. The saddest part is the 14% of targets who reported that there was no one in their lives attempting to bring hope and positivity.

It was good to see health professionals — counselors and physicians — credited with providing so much emotional support. This means that the rising public awareness about workplace bullying has seeped into the professions. Therapists are starting to understand the devastating, potentially traumatizing effect toxic workplaces have on their clients. They are now less likely to blame victims as they once did. Physicians have been more sympathetic to patients suffering debilitating stress. Doctors recognize the health impact of distress better than others. Mental health professionals and medical doctors can help bring hope, and thus positive emotions, to targets simply by validating the reality of their experience. Telling targets that they are not crazy or imagining their experiences provides the emotional boost.

Peer coworkers were certainly more helpful than managers. It is well documented (WBI, 2008) that coworkers are reluctant to support bullied peers. They tend to isolate them, treating them like pariahs. The social exclusion is driven by the coworkers' fear of being targeted themselves. This might explain why coworkers fall lower in rank than friends outside work. Coworkers should be friends, too.

Managers were more helpful than HR. Human resources continues to provide positive news for only 1% of targets. [That is similar to the 1.9% estimate of cases in which HR was considered to have provided a fair resolution to bullying incidents reported to them — WBI IP 2012-C.]

The low rank given websites, books and articles intrigues us. WBI, whose major goal is to minimize the negativity, uses the internet to enable bullied targets to find help anonymously and impersonally. We do the same with our books. Rather than be disappointed, we understand that impersonal forms of emotional support pale in comparison to the emotional influence live intimate persons can have. We want all targets to be surrounded by people who love them.

Changing emotions requires more than cheerleading or words alone. Consider the hollowness of motivational speakers. When you hear the speech, you are moved, but there rarely is a “there” there afterwards. Registering emotional change requires human contact — touch, hugs, embrace. You can’t get that through websites, no matter how informative.

Information is cognitive. Emotions are full body experiences — physiological arousal, the label of emotions, cognitions, conscious and unconscious thought, all experienced in a social context.

That might explain the nearly nonexistent impact on emotions of social media contacts. Facebook “friends” and real friends differ radically. Tweets are nothing compared to an “I love you regardless of what happens at work” from an intimate partner.

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