



## Mind the Workplace Bullying Gaps: How Systems May Harm Targets

Are you a target of bullying considering sick leave? Are you a medical doctor, psychologist or psychiatrist who supports their sick leave? Are you someone in human resources or a union representative trying to help the target? Insurance case manager? Or a family member trying to help a loved one deal with bullying?

There is one critical thing you need to understand if you want to help—the target’s experience of going through what I call the “mind field.” As a therapist seeing targets of all ages, I have learned that there are gaps in our current systems, gaps that cause additional damages and delay recovery time. These gaps create a mind field for the target. Having been through this gap process myself, I believe there are solutions to better support those who may now be suffering in the isolation of sick leave.

This article tells the story of targets’ experience of this mind field, providing you with important context to better understand what you are dealing with.

### **Life Before Bullying**

Before the abuse begins, targets of bullying report feeling:

- safe
- financially secure
- goal-oriented with plans to reach goals
- proud of their hard-earned reputation
- enjoyment of their work.

***Definition: Workplace bullying is about the abuse of power and/or the attempt to take another person’s power away from him or her.***

Suddenly, they are blindsided by unexpected and unfamiliar negative behaviours coming from another person, often from someone they have trusted and respected. Week after week, these unexpected shocks will continue while additional behaviours begin, many of which may be humiliating and degrading. These experiences threaten targets’ sense of safety and security.

### **Life After Bullying**

Over time with repeated abuse, targets of bullying may become nervous. They begin to brace themselves daily for fear of the unexpected. It is human nature to turn to a coping

mechanism when overwhelmed by stress: fight, flight or freeze. If the abuse and fear of abuse continues, targets can become too ill to focus, to cope, or to function in the workplace.

As time passes and the abuse continues, many targets will find themselves suffering from one or more of the following conditions:

- depression
- anxiety
- panic attacks
- symptoms similar those of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- headaches
- insomnia
- loss of appetite
- gastrointestinal disorders
- heart conditions and more.

Because of the insidious nature of workplace bullying, many people are entrenched in the abuse and are quite ill before seeking help. There are reasons why targets and bystanders avoid reporting abuse, and that will be explored in a future article.

### **Bullying and Sick Leave**

With medical support, the process of applying for sick leave begins. Here is a typical experience:

1. Targets will complete a large package of forms with many personal questions.
2. They will receive phone calls from insurance case managers asking more personal questions.
3. Some will experience a home visit from another insurance representative asking personal questions.

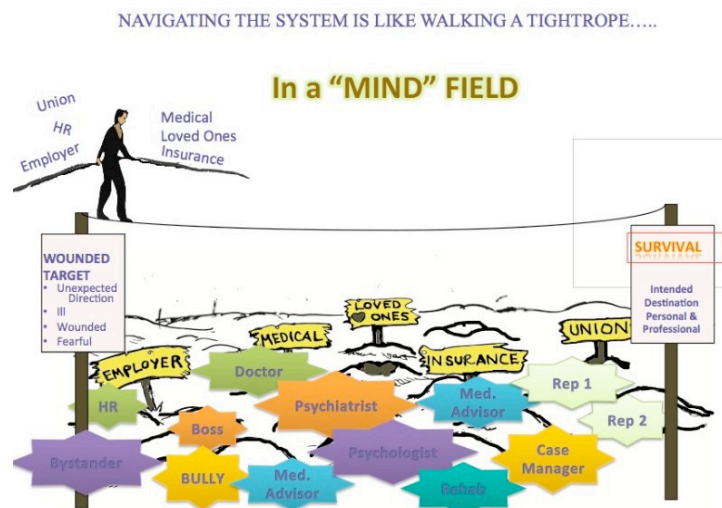
Meanwhile, targets often begin feeling isolated and cut off from their supportive colleagues. Some describe this as living in the unknown. Questions flood their minds: Will the insurance company support me? What if they do not? Do I appeal? Apply for unemployment insurance? Welfare? What about my job? My home? How will I pay for my children's school supplies? What about my spouse's medications for cancer? The worrying is endless and the stress is heightened.

***"My clients often feel hopeless and stuck by the time they reach out to me for help. Many tell me that the process of applying and staying on sick leave exacerbates***

***their loss of power or control over their lives."***  
**— Linda Crockett, Founder & President, Alberta Bullying  
Research, Resources, & Recovery Centre**

### The “Mind Field” Experience

For targets of bullying, they often begin to feel like they are walking a tightrope over a “mind field” as they complete forms and speak to many different people. One wrong answer could cost them their income, home, food, medications and more. Their stress levels increase as this process unfolds and as it takes time for their case to be evaluated. Depending on the employer, there may be more forms from occupational health to complete. If targets contacts their union, which they should, there will be yet more forms to fill out.



Each system will have its own set of policies and guidelines for workplace bullying. Each system will have different restrictions about what information it can share about the target's case. Case in point—one of my clients experienced over 38 different people addressing her file within an 18 month period. This leaves the task of navigating the system up to the target, the person on sick leave who is trying to recover. In targets' attempts to prevent delays or errors, which may threaten their income, targets will need to keep up with paper flow, communications, and the policies of each system. But what if some targets do not speak English as a first language? What if they are not familiar with our systems? This does not support success for anyone involved in the case.

***One wrong word, one person losing a document, one person forgetting to process a document, one or more people going on holidays, or transferring out, and the target's income, benefits, and livelihood may be affected negatively.***

Making matters even more stressful, some of the people handling the targets' cases may end up changing jobs. The process of dealing with workplace bullying is time consuming, and this kind of change does indeed happen. This means more introductions to new people must take place. There are, therefore, new people in the mix to contend with who are now making decisions about a target's livelihood.

### **Effects of Mind Field on Targets**

What does this mean for the target of bullying? More stress, anxiety, insomnia, gastrointestinal symptoms, fear, shame, isolation, chronic pain, and ultimately a delayed and costly recovery. Clearly this defeats the purpose of sick leave. A person on sick leave will be directed to rest, to recuperate, and to do what they can to recover. The irony of many cases is that a person on sick leave can be cut off payments by the insurance company if they are not following their medical recommendations. The system itself is too often responsible for delaying recovery and thus creating secondary injury for those on sick leave. The system at this point in time is not designed in the best interest of the person deemed to be too ill to work.

Many of my clients have shared statements with me similar to the following:

- "Being on sick leave is like punishment or torture for being ill."
- "You cannot see my suffering, so people find it easy to judge me."
- "I feel ashamed, isolated, and too embarrassed to be in public."
- "What if a colleague sees me in the grocery store and I happened to be smiling?"
- "What if I put extra effort into looking good one day and I am seen by a colleague?"
- "We are not allowed to talk about being on sick leave. We are told to keep this private."
- "The silence that exists about being sick leave scares me."

### **Customizing Bullying Solutions**

For targets, the stress of applying, the overwhelming amount of paperwork, the risks for delays, the lack of communication among organizations, the possibility for mistakes being made, the resulting isolation created by the system, as well as the additional factors of feeling judged, ashamed, and fearful of being seen, can create additional symptoms and problems. I believe that employers' return to work programs and duty to accommodate are also negatively impacted. This is a great cost to all parties involved. This is the system we must work within at the moment to find solutions for workplace bullying.

ABRC recognizes that every case is unique. Unfortunately, there is no one size fits all explanation or solution for all cases given the complexities outlined in this article. ABRC offers consultations and/or counselling sessions. Our support is offered throughout all stages of the workplace bullying process for anyone affected by bullying:

- difficult decision making
- sick leave consideration
- leave of absence consideration
- return to work
- duty to accommodate.

ABRC also assists employers, unions, insurance case managers, and medical teams with identifying and preventing gaps, creating solutions, and ultimately decreasing frustration, fears, anxiety, and isolation for targets of workplace bullying.

NAVIGATING THE SYSTEM IS LIKE WALKING A TIGHTROPE.....

