



Are you a target of bullying considering sick leave?

Are you a medical doctor, psychologist or psychiatrist who supports your patient taking sick leave? Are you someone in human resources or a union rep? Insurance case manager? Family member? This article will help you to understand the experience from the targets perspective. As a therapist seeing targets of all ages, the following are common themes demonstrating that the gaps in our current systems. Gaps which cause additional damages and delay recovery time. The added costs are significant for all.

After a period of workplace bullying many targets of this abuse will find themselves suffering from one or more of the following conditions: severe depression, anxiety, panic attacks, symptoms similar those of post traumatic stress disorder, headaches, insomnia, loss of appetite, gastrointestinal disorders, heart condition, and more. Due to the insidious nature of workplace bullying, many people are entrenched in the abuse and quite ill before seeking help. There are reasons for targets and bystanders avoiding reporting abuse. *Stay tuned for an article on the topic of 'avoiding reporting'.*

Before the abuse begins, targets of bullying report feeling safe, financially secure, goals and plans in place, proud of their hard earned reputation, and enjoyment of their work. Suddenly they are side blinded by unexpected and unfamiliar negative behaviours of another. Often by someone they trusted and/or respected. Week after week these unexpected shocks will continue while additional humiliating and degrading behaviours begin. This threatens their sense of safety and security. Over time with repeated abuse, the target 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, a target can become too ill to focus, cope, or function in the workplace.

With medical support the process of applying for sick leave will commence. A target will complete a large package with many personal questions. They will receive phone calls from insurance case manager asking more personal questions. Some will experience a home visit from another insurance representative asking personal questions. The target is now feeling isolated and/or cut off from their supportive colleagues and information about their work load (clients). Some describe this as living in the unknown. Will the insurance company support them? What if they do not? Do they 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 wife's medications she has cancer? The worrying is endless and the stress heightened.

For the target of bullying this will feel like they are walking a tight rope over a mind field. One wrong answer could cost them their income - home, food, medications and more. Their stress level increases as this process takes time for evaluation. Depending on the

employer, there may be more forms from occupational health. If the target contacts their union (which they should) there will be more forms. As this process continues some of the people handling the target's case may change jobs. This means that another introduction must take place. Another person to make decisions on the target's life. One of my clients experienced over 38 different people addressing her file within an 18 month period. One wrong word, one person losing a form, one person forgetting to process a document, one or more people going on holidays, or transferring out, and the target's income, benefits, livelihood may be affected. Problem is each system has their own policies and guidelines. Organizations are limited about what they can talk to other organizations about. Some will not talk to the other. This leaves the task of navigating the system up to the target. The one on sick leave. In attempts to prevent delays or errors causing delays, the target will need to keep up with paper flow and policies of each system. What if the target does not speak English as a first language? What if they are not familiar with our systems? This does not support success.

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 would be directed to rest, recuperate and do what they can to recover. The irony of this is, a person on sick leave insurance benefits can be cut off payments by the insurance company if they are not following their medical recommendations. Yet the gaps in the system create the additional stress. Is this process designed in the best interest of the person deemed to ill to work?

Many of my clients share the following statements:

- *"Being on sick leave is like punishment or torture for being ill".*
- *"You cannot see suffering, people find it easier to judge".*
- *"I feel ashamed, isolated, and 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? People can be cruel".*
- *"People judge me based on what little they know. I am not bleeding so I must be faking?"*
- *"We are not allowed to talk about being on sick leave, we are told to keep this private. It's my choice what I share but the silence about sick leave scares me".*
- *We need to be sharing what this is like and stop the silence. Why should I be ashamed for being abused by this person? He should be the one struggling not me!*

The stress of applying, paper work, risks for delays, lack of communication between organizations, mistakes made, isolation created, and addition factors of feeling judged, ashamed and fearful of being seen, can create additional symptoms, sometimes cause a secondary trauma, and delay recovery significantly. I believe return to work programs are also affected due to the experiences shared in this article. All of this adds a great cost for all parties involved. Who is responsible?