



The Wound of Workplace Bullying ***Anticipatory - Complicated Grief***

"We are anticipating it, preparing for it and expecting it, and doing so elicits a vast range of extreme, conflicting emotions".
We anticipate our lives will change after the loss (Hogan).

Relate the following definitions to someone who is targeted by a bullying in the workplace:

Anticipatory Grief: "a grief reaction that occurs before an impending loss".
With cases of workplace bullying the employee who is targeted will anticipate their loss of employment. A job they love and their livelihood which included i.e.: important connections and relationships, investments, health benefits, and their reputation.

Complicated Grief: will occur when a natural grief process becomes impaired. For example: conflicts in relationships, legal issues, additional stressors with internal or external services which create further barriers to moving forward i.e.: validation, sense of safety and fairness, or justice.

With workplace bullying, the employee who is targeted by a bully will experience by definition: "a variety of bullying tactics over a period of time (6 months to years)". Tactics include ostracism, work and relationship sabotage, rumours, gossip, repeated reprimands due to false accusations made against them.

Workplace bullying begins without warning and continues for an undetermined period of time. When the threat of bullying begins, however subtle it may be, targets and bystanders become aware that something has occurred. The abuse is insidious so initially it is difficult to comprehend what is happening until the effects become more severe or chronic.



No one expects to be abused in their workplace. We expect to see maturity, respect, skills, and professionalism. In addition, our employers have policies in place; Code of Conduct, Code of Ethics, Standards of Practice. Naturally employees believe they are safe so when safety guards are down, targets are often blindsided by their colleague or leaders' when unpredictable rages, mood swings, or other bullying tactics occur.

It's Just Like a Train Wreck

Whether you see the train wreck coming or not it is often a shocking unpredictable and disastrous outcome. One minute you are feeling good about your workplace, and the next you are feeling shattered. After a series of shocking incidences, it is human nature to stay in a state of brace - hypervigilance. For survival purposes the targeted employee tries to prepare for the next experience rather than suffer the derailing effects of unpredictable abuse. The unexpected confusing shocks of psychological harassment can be traumatizing. I have heard hundreds of employees say that they just want to do a good day's work; they still need to function. In order to do this many adapt to the self protection or survival mode of hypervigilance. Hypervigilance is one of the symptoms therapists use to diagnose PTSD.

Complicated grief is about a sense of impending loss. In the workplace, bullying is about the fear of being physically, psychologically, emotionally, and financially harmed. It becomes complicated when one does not have the ability to predict or identify how or when they may be harmed next, or how deeply they may be harmed 'this time'. Many have no idea if anyone will support them, believe them, or protect them. The mind of an employee who is



target begins to race or ruminate in search of support, evidence, logic, meaning, validation, safety, and understanding.

Loss of Identity

Our 'work life identity' influences our personal and social identity. We use our work life to measure our accomplishments, create more goals to achieve, and to build our life security. Work has an impact on our self-esteem, self-worth, and our sense of who we are. In a toxic workplace, targets of bullying who are not supported may receive multiple negative spoken or unspoken messages every day. These messages may come from those who act out with bullying behaviours, bystanders, people in leadership positions, support services i.e.: human resources, union representatives, insurance agencies, and sometimes family and friends. These negative messages imply that the employees targeted is not supposed to believe their own 'common senses' i.e.: you didn't experience bullying, you did see what you saw, you didn't hear what you heard, and you should not feel what feel. For the target, this is an impending train wreck.

Not so long ago our society gave these same messages to those who suffer domestic violence and/or sexual abuse. Today employees from all professions, suffer this same silencing shame. Is it any wonder why self-doubt becomes crippling? A loss of identity further impacts and 'complicates' the experience of anticipatory grief.



Grief of a loved one: a multifaceted response to a loss, particularly to the loss of someone or something that has died, to which a bond or affection was formed. Although conventionally focused on the emotional response to loss, it also has physical, cognitive, behavioural, social, and philosophical dimensions.

Grief of a job one loved: is a multifaceted response to a loss, particularly to the loss of job or career to which a bond or affection was formed. Although conventionally focused on the emotional response to loss, it also has physical, cognitive, behavioural, social, and philosophical dimensions.

Recovery will be similar to any grieving process. It will be unique for each person. It is helpful for all professionals, family members, and friends, to be aware of the grief process experienced by an employee experiencing workplace bullying.

You Can Make A Difference!

My hope for anyone reading this article is that you will choose to increase your knowledge and carefully select the language you use to help yourself and/or others who may be suffering. I hope this will bring some level of relief as you gain more understanding about the impact of what you have experienced, or of what you are witnessing others experience. I hope



this will help all professionals further understand the psychological hazards and injuries of workplace bullying, and what is needed for early intervention and/or recovery.

Effective Tips for Support

1. Validation is the most essential 'first response'. Whether you witnessed it or not, you can validate that something happened and, how they feel about it.
2. Reinforce that no matter how complicated or hopeless a situation is, there are solutions or options. There are answers and there is hope. Targets in distress will often be in a bit of a fog limiting their perspectives on solutions. They will often feel stuck or trapped.
3. Recommend they see a workplace specialist who deals with these cases.
4. Your knowledge, empathy, and clarity will become a life jacket for a target drowning in the nightmare of workplace bullying.

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