

## Workplace bullies ruin lives

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Kim is being stalked in the halls by her supervisor. Her every move is scrutinized, judged. Every day, she is berated with personal insults suggesting that she's just not good enough to work anywhere.

The yelling and unfair accusations do not simply make her hate coming to work. It has led to more serious health issues.

Kim, a 29-year-old medical office worker, who didn't want her last name used, has fallen into a depression. She's losing weight, having panic attacks and, two months ago, had to take a leave of absence from work. The Berkeley resident is hoping to transfer to another office, but in the meantime, she's going to counseling to heal. She dreads returning to her workplace and her bully.

"It's like I'm stuck," she says. "I don't know what to do. I am sick, and I can't change this person. I don't want to lose my job."

Bullying is a growing concern across the country, yet workplace bullying is a life-altering threat that rarely gathers the attention that schoolyard bullying does. Still, workplace bullying can prompt feelings of stress, depression and anxiety, and some say it can cause heart attacks and even lead to suicide.

There are no laws on the books in any state against workplace bullying and no easy legal recourse to embark on when bullying ruins lives.

Psychologists and spouses Gary and Ruth Namie have heard thousands of stories as heartbreaking as Kim's since 1997, when they developed an anti-workplace bullying organization in Benicia. Now called the Workplace Bullying Institute and headquartered in Bellingham, Wash., the center offers support and counseling to people who are victims of what the Namies call verbal violence in the workplace. They also commission studies to find out whom is being bullied at work and how bullying affects the workplace.

The Namies got into this business after Ruth Namie became a target for a bully at a Bay Area mental health center. Shortly after reporting to her job, she says she was screamed at in the halls, picked on by her boss and isolated from her co-workers.

"I felt I had done something wrong," she says. "I did so well in my other jobs and never had a problem. I had a very good career. I just wanted to work. But I kept feeling like I was doing something wrong. I was ashamed, and I didn't want to tell anybody."

She was eventually put on administrative leave, and she and her husband made it their mission to fight workplace bullying.

"I am so worried about this," says Gary Namie, visibly shaken during a recent seminar in South San Francisco where a young woman in tears shared that she had been bullied two years before. "You don't typically read about the suicides that are related to this, the health problems. Yet we tell (victims of bullying) that if you don't take care of your health, it will harm you in innumerable ways, and it could cost you your life."

Workplace bullying can happen in any workplace, Namie says, and the targets are usually people who simply want to do their work undisturbed. The bully can be a boss, co-worker or supervisor. According to 2010 research by Zogby International, 35 percent of workers have experienced bullying firsthand, what amounts to 53 million people. The study says that 62 percent of bullies are men, while 58 percent of targets are women. Women target women 80 percent of time. Workplace bullies are usually jealous of the target's accomplishments and drive, the Namies say.

"You're sport," Gary Namie says. "Targets are the salt of the Earth, and it gets you snookered."

Peralta College District math professor William Lepowsky had been teaching at Laney College in

Oakland for 32 years when bullies started targeting him in the early 2000s. "It was something I was absolutely ignorant of until I experienced it," he says. The bullying started after Lepowsky wrote and self-published a statistics textbook used at Laney. He was accused by an administrator of acting improperly and, even after being cleared of any wrongdoing, Lepowsky says he was threatened with the loss of his job. "A good analogy to (workplace bullying) is that it's like a mugging. You go to the theater and you're walking home, and they steal your purse or something," he says. "It's obviously a huge violation, something no one is looking for. It comes out of the blue and prevents you from enjoying going out to the movie or whatever you were going to enjoy." Lepowsky fought back by gathering support from co-workers and won, eventually receiving a written apology from the then-Chancellor of the District for the "stress and strain" caused by actions of other administrators. A change in leadership at the college and District made him feel comfortable at work again. Lepowsky talks openly about his experience because he wants to help others. He never sued the district nor got a settlement. But if he had chosen to sue because of the bullying, he would have faced a daunting problem: The practice is not illegal in the workplace if it's not based on discrimination and doesn't fit the legal definition of harassment. Therefore, if a target chooses to take legal action they rarely win cases against their employers.

"They have no legal recourse because it's not against the law," says Michelle Smith, a Sacramento-based workplace advocate trying to gather support for the Healthy Workplace Bill. The bill, which has been introduced in several states and has died in committee in California, would define an "abusive work environment" and hold both the bully and the employer accountable for the harm workplace bullying causes.

So what can be done if you are a target of bullying?

The Namies assure targets that they are not alone, that they didn't cause the bullying to happen.

"Bullying is domestic violence where the abuser is on the payroll," Gary Namie says. And, like in cases of domestic violence, the victim is simply that, a victim.

In their book "The Bully At Work: What You Can Do to Stop the Hurt and Reclaim Your Dignity on the Job," (Sourcebooks, \$16.99) the Namies suggest ways of taking care of your needs first. See a therapist or work with a Workplace Bullying Institute expert to develop strategies for coping with the bully. In some cases, asking an employer to fix the problem is appropriate -- but it could backfire. According to Workplace Bullying Institute research, in some cases the complaints are either ignored or the bullying is intensified.

In a worst-case scenario, if your health is being severely harmed, they suggest taking time off work or looking for alternative workplaces.

"I think your health is much more important than working at a job that can potentially kill you," Ruth Namie says.

Some bullying types:

**Screaming Mimi:** This bully isn't afraid to yell at you. She controls through fear and intimidation, even throwing objects around the office.

**Constant Critic:** The critic is an extremely negative nit-picker and aims to destroy confidence in your competence. He makes unreasonable demands for work with impossible deadlines and expects perfection.

**Two-Headed Snake:** This bully is passive-aggressive, dishonest and indirect. He smiles to hide aggression.

**Gatekeeper:** She controls all the resources you need to succeed, including money, staffing and time. She keeps her target out of the loop and makes new rules on a whim.