

Successful Strategies

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Most of my work in the area of bully-victim problems involves helping victims. Where people have been bullied at work, it is sometimes possible for them to return to the same workplace after receiving some psychotherapy, provided they receive ongoing support from their employer.

By the time some victims of bullying seek professional help, they are already suffering from symptoms of a post-traumatic stress disorder, and their physical and emotional health has been seriously damaged. My treatment programme will not only involve helping them survive and to have the bullying stopped, but then to deal with the post traumatic stress disorder.

In a case of prolonged and repeated victimisation, the first two hours at least will simply involve listening to a torrent of words as my patient tells the whole story. It is useless trying to get objective information at this stage. The patient will not be satisfied with anything less than complete comprehension of the cause and the extent of their suffering. Other people may have previously ignored or trivialised their complaints, and many victimised people wrongly assume that routine questioning is simply some preliminary to dismissing their concerns.

I can then proceed with taking a family tree and personal life history and begin outlining where we go from there. Details of family tree history and personal development will be useful for me to understand the particular vulnerabilities of my patient. This knowledge will be used by me in planning the best methods of therapy. However, such sensitive personal information falling into the wrong hands may invite misuse. Given that lawyers lately are using writs of non-party discovery to force psychiatrists to hand over their confidential records, I either give the patient my personal and family history notes to bring to the therapy interviews each time, or else I keep them in a special envelope which is not made available should I be forced to hand over my notes.

It may seem odd when I say that my first therapeutic challenge with victimised patients is to convince them they have been victimised.

My experience is that every victim of bullying has internalised the abuse, and more or less holds himself in contempt. Even small children bullied by bigger more powerful children or groups will hate themselves for crying and letting the bullies see they were frightened. The same applies to adults bullied on the job. They may be very critical of themselves for allowing the bullying to take place. Sometimes this criticism extends to verbally abusive self-talk and sometimes even to physically hurting themselves.

Our bully-friendly society

I am often surprised at how receptive our society is to bullying. When another person working in the same workplace says something nasty, we often respond with the thought "What did I do to make that person treat me in such a way?" The response should be "Why is that person so ill-mannered?" It almost seems as if we live in an accuser-friendly society. I find myself having to convince some people that good manners are an essential pre-requisite for every occupation.

How come so many people who are victimised will blame themselves for the bullying? Strangely enough, on analysis, this phenomenon can be seen to be related to the idea of individual competence. It is a common observation that Australian mothers will initially accept the blame for their children's learning problems. Incompetent experts can easily convince mothers the reason their children are doing so badly at school is the mothers' poor parenting skills. The women reason that if they are causing the problem, then, given the right information, they themselves can turn it around.

Likewise, people being victimised find partial comfort in the concept that they themselves have brought this bullying on themselves. They want to believe this, because if they can find out what they're doing wrong and change it, the bullying will then stop. In an inverse, sort of upside-down way, being blamed for the bullying you are experiencing is potentially empowering you to stop it.

Of course, there is no truth in this at all. Kids being bullied at school because they are too tall, too short, too fat, too skinny, wear glasses, don't wear glasses, are black, aren't black, and so on, cannot call off the bullying by changing their appearance or what they wear. The only constant characteristic of people being

bullied is that they make good targets, and for one reason or another, can't fight back.

Step 1: Understand that you have been bullied

The first step in the therapeutic process is for the patient to understand they have been bullied. It is not uncommon for the patient not to realise initially they have been the target for a deliberate programme of harassment. A clever boss who has suddenly become unpleasable may justify continued put-downs as "I'm just trying to help you lift your game". And a lot of present-day bullying is hidden within the abuse of staff development reviews and meetings.

When I help my patients focus on whether they are being bullied or not, could I be suggesting something that isn't true? Am I shaping my patients to become paranoid?

In fact, there is little doubt when someone is being bullied. There are tell-tale signs:

- The conflict is totally one-sided. Bullying is the repeated act of a stronger person or group deliberately putting someone under stress. Robust competition or fighting between equals is not bullying.
- Bullies threaten victims that they are not to tell anyone about their suffering or the violence will be worse for them. The demand that the victim keeps silent is never part of a normal review process or normal disciplinary actions.
- The distress of the victim does not reduce the aggression, but makes it worse. Seeing a victim's weakness emboldens a predator. By contrast, revealing one's weakness or distress will disarm people of goodwill. If the patient were being subjected to normal discipline only, their apparent distress would reduce the aggression directed against them.

It is not uncommon for workplace bullies when confronted, to complain that the victim is in truth a terrible nuisance and his workmates have a right to be rid of him. I don't question the right of a boss to sack an inefficient worker, and no doubt there are cases where workers with tenure are doing less than their fair share. However, there are legal and appropriate ways of sacking people, and in my view there is no excuse for not using these provisions. Just as there is no excuse for bad manners in the workplace.

Step 2: Survive the bullying

Once my patients are aware they have been bullied, the next step is for them to decide whether this is acceptable, whether they can tolerate the bullying continuing. If they decide they will not tolerate it any further, there are three steps they need to take at that time:

- Tell as many people as you can
- Change your current response
- Make yourself a less accessible target

Step 3: Do you want the bullying to stop?

In my work with victims of bullying, I have had the privilege of getting to know some people who have sufficient true grit to trigger off a reform process. They may be whistleblowers who have been victimised simply because they are people who insist on doing the right thing when others they work with have been compromised and corrupted. I count it a privilege to have seen how futile attempts to destroy innocent people can result in public attention directed towards cleaning up the corruption.

I have a mental image of the bullies thinking the victim is a candy-covered peanut they can crush between their jaws. But the person may turn out to be a candy-covered ball bearing that destroys their teeth. By the time they have worked out that trying to crush this morsel is ineffective, they may have destroyed their ability to bite anyone, looking foolish with a mouthful of broken teeth.

Bullying must be stopped from the top

You cannot beat bullying in a total bully culture. We have learned this fact from examining successful school anti-bullying programmes. The Norwegian Ministry of Education decided to do something about school bullying, and 5 years later the incidence of bully/victim incidents had been halved in Norwegian schools. By contrast, where an Education Department allows school principals to bully their

staff in a covert down-sizing operation, there is little hope of successful school anti-bullying programmes.

However, we live in a democracy. The rules of democracies were invented to protect us from totalitarian bullying. Voters don't like politicians who employ bullies as public servants. Furthermore, David/Goliath stories are interesting to the general public, and the entertainment media are happy to investigate situations where innocent people are being victimised by powerful foes.

The aim, therefore, in stopping bullying, is to bring it to the attention of people in a position of power to stop it. Voters may exert an influence on the behaviour of politicians and public servants, while consumer groups and labour unions can exert power over businessmen and employer groups. Sometimes, legal action in the courts becomes necessary.

Using the unarmed combat model

How can an ordinary person with limited personal resources hope to overturn a corrupt system which has set out with superior force to harm that person? Some Asian techniques of unarmed combat like judo and ju-jitsu were invented to deal with such an eventuality. Using these techniques, a small man confronted with a bigger, stronger person lunging towards him may turn the tables quite quickly, landing the bully flat on his back. If we analyse the elements in this process, we can use these same moves to defeat workplace bullies. The elements are:

- The small person confronts the stronger foe lunging towards him.
- He does not attempt to stop the enemy, but simply takes hold of him.
- Then the smaller person turns and appears to face the same direction as the bully.
- Then the smaller person appears to fall over, while still keeping hold of the stronger enemy.
- The momentum of the stronger enemy's attack carries the enemy over the shoulder of the smaller person.
- The enemy lands flat on his back on the ground in front of the smaller person, with the wind knocked out of him, powerless to help himself.

Let us take as an example, a situation where a worker employed by an organisation is being harassed through "staff development" meetings where several people in positions of superiority criticise this worker's performance, raising the same trivial issues over and over again. Several factors identify this process as active victimisation. Firstly, the meetings began a week after the boss made a speech to the section in which it was advised there would be a reduction in staff, and that individual workers should examine their aims in relation to the aims of the organisation and consider if their best interests might be better served in obtaining employment elsewhere. Secondly, the managers in the "staff development" meetings do not seem concerned if individual staff show signs of distress during the meetings. A process involved in genuine staff development would have been expected to avoid damaging individual workers. Thirdly, the tell-tale bully sign, individual people are advised they are not to mention these "staff development" meetings to the union.

Let us examine what the harassed worker can do to survive the bullying and to stop it.

Actions

The victim immediately seeks help from a counsellor, who helps him focus objectively on whether his work performance could be improved and how. The counsellor advises the victim to talk to his trade union representative, to take notes during the meetings and seek permission to tape record the proceedings. Meanwhile, the victim is to appear enthusiastic about these "staff development" meetings, apparently grateful for any comments on his performance that may help him "lift his game". He is to be so grateful and enthusiastic about the special attention being showed to him, he just can't stop talking about it to work colleagues, the union rep, and people working in other institutions. The initial outcome is that the victim no longer feels powerless and put upon, remains cheerful during the meeting, and unnerves his tormentors with praise. Furthermore, the union rep asks to attend the meetings, and therefore this has to be balanced with the attendance of someone from human resources. Organising the meetings becomes too cumbersome for the supervisor, and the meetings lapse.

Surviving

Tell as many people as you can

Take written notes. Tape record proceedings where possible, whether they agree or not. You can always apologise profusely and admit to bad manners. "Now that I know you didn't want me to tape record our meeting, I'll certainly wipe that tape, you can be sure of that!" But don't wipe the tape. Let them sweat. And don't hand the tape over.

Change your response. Instead of appearing stressed and frustrated by the unwarranted criticisms, appear grateful for them. "I'm so glad you're giving me this opportunity". "I was talking to my friend who works in --, and they don't have these staff development meetings there. They're going to consider starting them up."

Having to go to a lot of trouble to organise the meetings makes the bully consider whether it is worth the effort, seeing the victim is not being suitably damaged any more. This is hardening the target.

Stopping the bullying

Make contact with the bully, take hold of him. The victim actively accepts the "staff development" meetings as useful for him.

Turn around and appear to go the bully's way. "I'm glad you've given me this opportunity".

Fall over. "I have an apology to make. I'm sorry I forgot your advice about not mentioning this to the union rep. I ran into him the other day in the canteen, and honestly, it just came out. Now he says he insists on coming to the meetings. What should I say to put him off? He's terribly persistent".

Let them fall over your shoulder, and pull their supporters with them. A letter to your tormentor's superiors, regretting that the "staff development" meetings seem to have degenerated into name-calling and denigration leads you to suggest they should be cancelled. Your tormentor's superiors will then have to decide whether to distance themselves from the process. They know already you can't be trusted not to take it higher. They themselves have bosses. They choose to survive and order your tormentors to stop.

Once a victimised worker can regain some self-confidence and has a coherent strategy to follow, he or she can actually enjoy making the former tormentors nervous. Bullies usually think they can predict a victim's response. When the victim responds unpredictably, and appears to be planning some appeal to

higher authority or to get the media in to publicise what is going on, the bullies begin to experience anxiety. And anxiety makes people stop what they're doing.

Treatment of post traumatic stress symptoms caused by workplace bullying

Where the bullying has caused emotional wounds, my work with victims always involves undoing the damage that has already been done.

The first steps I have already described.

Next the painful memories must be re-worked and discussed so that they begin to make sense within some coherent framework, concept, or theology. The traumatic experience is transformed into a learning experience. An explanation must be found for the bullying behaviour in terms of what the patient already understands about human nature.

If the person has no pre-existing concepts of good and evil, it may be necessary in therapy to offer various explanations from different cultures and religious belief systems. A Hindu explanation might be that the abuse has arisen from Karma generated in a past life, where the person had it all too easy. A Buddhist explanation might be that the person reacted to the criticism because it was too important to be approved of, and thus attachment to things of this life has brought suffering yet again. Or a Christian explanation might be that God allows His children to be crucified so that the evil hidden within the power structures in the workplace might become easily visible.

In some cases, the person might be so hurt that the traumatic events can only be seen in simplistic terms as good guys versus bad guys. And the rules are that the bad guys win to start with, but the good guys triumph in the long run.

Finally, the return to the workplace may involve sophisticated psychological techniques such as progressive desensitisation, beyond the scope of this chapter.