



The Office

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Remember the boy who made you cry every day on the school bus in elementary school, the middle school classmate who took credit for your work on a group project, or the high school clique that refused to let you sit at their lunch table? Bullying behaviors can take many forms over your lifetime. All of these incidents can cause severe emotional pain and could leave you dreading going to school every morning.

You've probably long since finished high school now, and you'd like to think that these bullies have grown up and seen the error of their ways. Unfortunately, that's not always true—many bullies will continue to emotionally abuse others throughout their lives. And once you reach the workplace, a bully may even end up managing you or working in the next cubicle.

Carole, a publicist, spent nine years happily working for a small company when a new operations manager, Bob, came on board. Right from the start, Bob began to belittle Carole in every way that he could.

“Bob called me in his office and told me this is a business and I am no longer allowed to say ‘good morning’ when I come in,” Carole says. Soon after that, “one day I walked into work and Bob had turned my desk around to face the wall,” she recalls. “There was no answer when I asked why.”

Before Bob's arrival, Carole loved her job. But “after being told how great I was and given a laptop, bonuses, hard work and fun times, it took two months of me being bullied to put me in a horrible state,” she says. She believes that Bob's bullying was intended to force her to quit her job. Even though she refused to give in to the pressure, she was soon let go, on Bob's recommendation.

Carole's story may sound frightening, but she's not alone: the 2007 WBI-Zogby survey states that 13 percent of employees are currently being bullied in the workplace, while 24 percent have experienced bullying from a coworker or boss in the past.

by Kathryn Hawkins

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Bullies aren't always men, either: according to the Zogby study, 40 percent of the bullies reported were women, and more than 70 percent of the time, their targets were other women. Even as women gain new positions of power in the workplace that wouldn't have been possible 50 years ago, some female bosses use their influence as a way to demean and belittle other women from receiving the same respect—take, for example, the tyrannical magazine editor Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada*, a fictionalized version of real-life *Vogue* editor-in-chief Anna Wintour.

“Many times bullies feel very threatened and scared inside, and they need to establish power, control and dominance, which they do through threats, violence, emotional and physical bullying, and being angry,” says Linnda Durré, a psychotherapist and the author of *Surviving the Toxic Workplace*.

In some cases, the work environment may make certain individuals more likely to abuse others. “Highly competitive, win-at-all-cost type companies are more likely to have workplace bullying,” says Mike Drieblatt, an educational consultant and co-author of *How to Stop Bullying and Social Aggression*. “Businesses with little or no policy and procedures related to human resources are also more prone to have bullying.”

Much like those traumatic high school cafeteria experiences, dealing with a workplace bully can be an intensely difficult experience. But if you're being bullied in your workplace, you don't need to put up with the abuse. Here are some expert-recommended tips on what you can do to put a stop to it.

If a boss or coworker yells at you about a work assignment, stay calm and ask for clarification. Tony Deblauwe, a human resources consultant and the author of *Tangling*

*with Tyrants: Managing the Balance of Power at Work*, once coached an office admin whose boss frequently yelled at her about work-related matters. “I asked her to cut his behavior quickly by saying, ‘Stop one moment, you said XYZ? Repeat?’” he says. “By not showing emotion and breaking into his train of thought before he became too incensed, it forced him to slow down and focus.”

This tactic also helped the admin to clarify what her boss was asking of her, which led to a much-improved work relationship between them.

Keep records of the bully's actions. Before making an issue of the bullying, it's important to track precise examples of what the bully has done to offend you. Typically, bullying “includes behavior that intimidates, degrades, offends or humiliates a worker, often in front of others,” says Drieblatt. “Bullying behavior creates feelings of defenselessness in the target and undermines an individual's right to dignity at work.”

If a coworker's actions toward you meet this criteria, you should begin keeping a detailed log of the hostile acts, which you can use to prove your case if necessary. “Track dates, times, places, what was said or done, and who was present,” says Drieblatt.

This journal can be a useful resource when you bring the situation up with the bully or with your human resources representative. In a worst-case scenario, you may need to use this information in a police report or a lawsuit.

Speak up about the problem. In some cases, a bullying boss or coworker may not realize she's hurt your feelings. It can help to clearly tell her what she's done and how it affects you, keeping a professional tone.

Durré suggests holding this discussion in a private conference room “with doors closed, away from the noise and

distractions.” If you feel uncomfortable being alone with the bully, ask a supervisor or HR representative to join in the meeting.

“The target of bullying has to quickly and effectively communicate that this type of behavior is not acceptable,” says Drieblatt. “Be specific. Tell the bully, ‘you keep interrupting me at meetings and I want you to stop,’ instead of ‘you are not being nice.’”

If confronting your bully doesn’t help, get a third party involved. If you’ve already asked the bully to back off, but he is still abusing you, it’s time to take more serious action.

“If you feel that the bullying behavior is interfering with your work, causing you to miss work, making you sick or fearful, it is time to get the HR person involved,” says Drieblatt. Your HR representative will be able to take the appropriate recourse with your boss or coworker, and may be able to assist you in transferring departments or offices if necessary.

If you work for a small company with no human resources department, your options are more limited. However, if your bully has a supervisor, bring the issue up with him. You can also “report it to the professional ethics committee, if there is one within the company, or to the state, national and local professional association’s ethics boards, and file a formal complaint,” says Durré.

In some cases, the abuse may be serious enough to get the police involved. If your bully has ever physically threatened or harmed you, contact your local law enforcement authorities, and take a leave of absence from work until the situation has been resolved.

If the bullying is affecting your work performance, your health or your emotional state, it’s not worth the paycheck.

Know when to quit. If you’ve already contacted the bully as well as a supervisor or HR representative about the problem, and there’s been no positive change in your workplace situation, it could be time to cut ties with the company. If the bullying is affecting your work performance, your health or your emotional state, it’s not worth the paycheck.

Polish up your résumé and put out the word to your friends that you are looking for a new job. If you’ve only worked at your current position for a short time and the bully is your immediate supervisor, you may want to leave the job off of your résumé; if you must include it, use a compassionate coworker as your reference. If you are asked about your reason for leaving in job interviews, you may briefly explain the circumstances, but be clear and professional in your account.

“Find another company where [you] are treated with respect, kindness and decency,” says Durré. “You have options. Use them!”

#### About the author:

Kathryn Hawkins is a writer based in Portland, Maine. She has written for magazines including *GOOD Magazine*, *E: The Environmental Magazine* and *Wildlife Conservation*, and is the editor of [Razoo.com](http://Razoo.com), a website for everyday philanthropy.

