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Workplace Bullying and Psychological Aggression

Research on workplace bullying and psychological aggression has grown considerably during the past decade, and it now cuts across several academic disciplines. Joel Neuman and Robert Baron note that workplace aggression is a comprehensive term that refers to any acts that are intended to harm workers in settings or situations related to their work, which can be physical or nonphysical in nature. In the literature, workplace aggression is considered an umbrella term for a variety of more specific types of behavior, including bullying, mobbing, incivility, emotional abuse, petty tyranny, abusive supervision, and generalized or status-blind harassment. Psychological aggression at work typically refers only to those acts or behaviors that are nonphysical in form and are intended to cause psychological distress or harm to the target. Workplace bullying, on the other hand, incorporates both physical and psychological forms of aggression and has been defined more specifically with regard to persistence, frequency, and duration of negative work behaviors directed at one or more individuals in the workplace. A pattern of behaviors is considered bullying only if it is persistent, occurring repeatedly during a given period of time rather than as isolated incidents that happen only occasionally.

Types of Behaviors

Generally speaking, workplace bullying and psychological aggression involve a wide range of behaviors that threaten, intimidate, humiliate, or undermine an individual's work reputation or performance. The types of behaviors include harassing, offending, social exclusion, derogatory remarks, insults, sabotage, withholding information, noninclusion, and physical acts that are perceived as intimidating or threatening. Acts of workplace psychological aggression and bullying most commonly involve nonphysical forms of aggression (either verbal or nonverbal) and are more likely to be passive in nature rather than active. These behaviors may be directed at one or more individuals in the workplace by one or more co-workers, supervisors, or customers/clients/patients.

Prevalence

Estimates of the prevalence of workplace bullying and psychological aggression vary depending on the sample used, how the terms are defined, how the time frame is used, and how the researcher asks the questions about the experiences and behaviors. Studies indicate that roughly 10 to 14 percent of workers report being victims of bullying, and this figure increases to 40 to 50 percent if those who are witnesses to bullying are included. Estimates of psychological aggression range from 27 percent and upward to 59 percent and even higher, depending on the study. Both men and women in the workplace may be targets of psychological aggression and bullying, as well as aggressors, and bullying and psychological aggression may be experienced at all levels of the organization including management. Workplace bullying and psychological aggression tend to be more prevalent in the health care and service delivery sectors.

Risk Factors

Several workplace factors have been shown to be related to workplace bullying and psychological aggression. Job characteristics such as increased workload and lack of job control and organizational features, including structure, politics, role ambiguity, and role conflict, have all been associated with workplace bullying and psychological aggression, as well as issues surrounding organizational change such as job insecurity and social change. Leadership style, interpersonal conflicts, poor organizational climate and culture, low levels

of organizational justice, and lack of social support from co-workers and supervisors also correlate with workplace bullying and psychological aggression. Lastly, some research indicates that individual or personality characteristics of the actors may also be related to engaging in aggressive behaviors in the workplace.

Consequences

Workplace bullying and psychological aggression have been found to be harmful to both the individual and the organization. Experiencing these negative behaviors has been related to decreased psychological well-being, including symptoms of depression, anxiety, feelings of helplessness, post-traumatic stress disorder, alcohol and substance abuse, and anger as well as to decreased cognitive functioning (attention, concentration). Psychosomatic complaints such as headaches, sleep disturbances, and gastrointestinal disorders have also been reported. Bullying and aggression also cost the organization in terms of poor job performance, reduced productivity, lowered job satisfaction, reduced organizational commitment, withdrawal from social and professional activities, and increased absenteeism and turnover. Experiencing these adverse behaviors at work may also spill over into family and home life. Furthermore, workplace bullying negatively impacts not only those targeted for the behaviors but bystanders or witnesses on the job as well.

Prevention and Intervention

Several suggestions have been made for preventing workplace bullying and psychological aggression, although few studies of intervention effectiveness have been conducted. It has been recommended that on an organizational level, goals, roles and responsibilities, policies, guidelines for acceptable behavior, and ethics should be clearly stated and infused throughout the organization. Successfully preventing workplace bullying also involves creating an organizational climate that fosters openness, respect, and tolerance of diversity. Some researchers have suggested that emphasis should also be put on management and supervisory styles or practices that promote fair treatment and respect for all employees.

Training has also been advocated for preventing workplace bullying and psychological aggression. It has been put forth that employees and managers should receive training in basic communication skills, conflict management, de-escalation techniques, as well as specific training in workplace aggression.

In terms of intervening, both formal and informal systems have been proposed for dealing with incidents of workplace bullying and psychological aggression. These systems might include involvement of personnel or human resource professionals, use of employee assistance programs (EAPs), formal complaint or grievance procedures, or using informal response teams and coaches.

It is important to keep in mind that few systematic evaluation studies are available regarding the effectiveness of interventions for workplace bullying and aggression. The need for such research continues to be a significant gap in the literature.

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Note: The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

See also Bullying; Incivilities/Social Disorder; Psychological/Emotional Abuse

Further Readings

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