

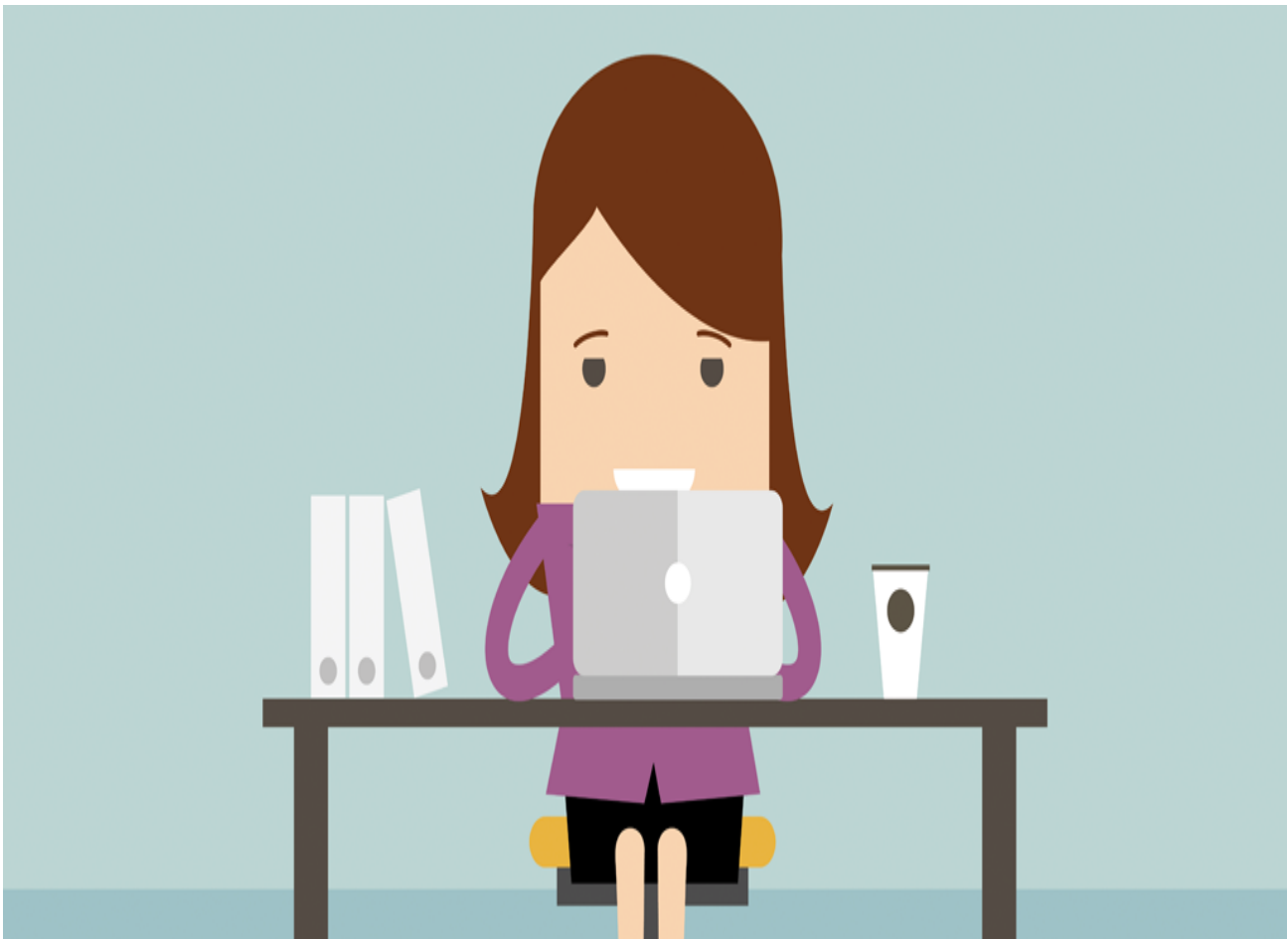
Resource

Overcoming problems at work

People who are trying to remain in employment as well as manage long term health issues, often face stress, bullying and discrimination in the workplace.

By Bridie Nelson and Sandi Sayer

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People who are trying to remain in employment as well as manage long term health issues, often face stress, bullying and discrimination in the workplace in addition to the normal day-to-day difficulties they experience.?

Colleagues may actively victimise and bully staff members who appear to be different or weaker than them. And if you are unfortunate enough to be on the receiving end of this behaviour, the constant fear of 'what's going to happen today' can be a major cause of absenteeism from work, which can lead to disciplinary action being taken or worse. In some instances, it is HR departments which are the perpetrators and so it's very easy to feel that there is no-one to turn to for help.

Sandi Sayer is an expert in the field of career coaching with many years of experience, and we asked her to share 5 top tips to help people manage and survive workplace bullying and stress:

There are many ways in which you can support and protect yourself if you are at the receiving end of workplace bullying, discrimination or stress. The five points below are the ones that are the most popular with clients I have worked with. They are tried and tested, and most importantly, they are all very easy to use.

1. Keep a comprehensive diary

If you find you are being bullied or discriminated against, one of the key things to do is to gather evidence to support your case. The best way to do this is to keep a diary or incident log. It should be kept and used discreetly – please do not show it to other colleagues or work friends.

You will need to record all events by the individual(s) that have affected you directly, which should include:

- ???The date and time of event
- ???What happened – recording all the details (include telephone conversations here too)
- ???Who else was present
- ???How did it make you feel (e.g. intimidated, scared, angry)

It is also advisable to keep all documentation, including emails and post-its, and please remember to keep text messages too if relevant.

Try not to base your evidence on hearsay or gossip from other colleagues; only record what you have witnessed yourself.

HR, managers, advisors and legal aid all need facts as well as feelings to put your case forward, so gather the facts as much as you can.

2. Look after you!

The most important person in your life is you, so it is vital to spend time looking after yourself. This is especially important when you are experiencing stress at work. Many people underestimate the effects stress can have on them, especially on their emotional well-being. Make sure you make time to give yourself space to relax, repair and regroup.

Here are a few easy to follow tips:

- ???Eat and drink as healthily as you are able. Stress has a hugely detrimental impact on your body, especially on your immune system. Avoid high fat and sugary foods, and replace them with fresh, wholesome ones. Vitamin supplements are OK; however, nothing beats eating good food so

your body can take what it needs the way it was designed to.

- ???Drink plenty of water.
- ???Take some gentle exercise – move your body as much as you are able, every movement you make helps.
- ???Spend time with people who make you feel great and make you laugh.
- ???Treat yourself once in awhile – yes go on buy yourself that CD, concert ticket or whatever it is that will make you feel good.
- ???Do something different once a month, something that takes you away from your normal everyday life. Maybe have a day off in the week and go to a local art gallery, have a picnic, or visit a friend you haven't seen in years.
- ???Make sure you take your allocated breaks at work.
- ???If you are able to, get outside and get some fresh air in your lungs at lunchtime – your body will love you for it.
- ???Smile (even if you don't feel like it).
- ???Talk to someone who you totally trust and respect and take time to discuss your feelings and thoughts. Two heads talking things through is far better than one head churning everything around and around.
- ???Ensure you have a hobby or interest outside of work that you love and spend a regular amount of time on it.

When you are in a stressful state, it is important not to overcompensate with extreme behaviours in other areas. So watch out for your coping mechanisms such as overeating (or under eating), drinking copious amounts of alcohol, taking non-prescription drugs, gambling or shopping. If these coping mechanisms appear and start to take over, it's time for you to take action or seek support from others.

3. Remain professional and adult

When you are in a heightened stressful state, it is very easy for you to revert back to being childlike and irresponsible. This is especially true if you are a victim of bullying. Stay as calm as possible, don't yell, swear or threaten the individual and of course at all times refrain from touching them. The key here is to remain professional and courteous and play everything by the book as much as you are able.

If you feel up to it and want to enter into a dialogue with the bully about their behaviour, make sure you remain calm and professional and please ensure you have witnesses (bullies don't like working in public).

If at any point, you feel that they will become aggressive, get to a safe and public place where there are other people present. Please avoid hiding in the toilets – workplace bullies, like their school ground counterparts, love isolating you in places like that which are hard for you to get away from, it gives them a huge ego boost.

4. Flex those 'self-muscles.'

And I don't mean bodybuilding, I mean strengthen those self-esteem, self-confidence and self-belief muscles!

The first thing to disappear when you are experiencing workplace stress is your self-confidence. You

start to doubt everything you do, you feel guilty for no reason, and in some case, paranoia can creep in. Unfortunately, you only realise that your confidence and self-esteem are on the floor somewhere, when things have gotten really bad.

There are many ways in which you can start flexing those brilliant confidence muscles of yours – self-help books, retreats, a holiday, having some therapy sessions or working with a coach are all hugely beneficial.

One size doesn't fit all; what works for others may not work for you, so be honest with yourself and go for what you really need. There is no shame in seeking help or asking for advice, look after you as you would your best friend.

5. Be Positive, Efficient and Effective

Initially, someone who bullies or discriminates you are doing so to protect themselves as opposed to seeking you out.

What do I mean?

Well, the person causing your workplace nightmare, has only one thing on their agenda, which is to ensure that those around them do not cotton on to the fact that they are unable to do their job effectively.

The best way for them to achieve this is to produce a smokescreen of cunning diversions. Here they will blame others for errors, problems or poor quality of work. This is their way of ensuring management look at you and not them.

Please be aware that these small-minded people who make your life hell are often lonely and very sad. Unfortunately, they are not willing to seek help or make positive changes in their lives; instead, they will single you out. Why? Because it's the easiest option for them.

So back to you, if you do your job really well and with a smile on your face (they hate that by the way), then you will have beaten them fair and square. Their mind games and manipulations cannot outdo your positive actions.

It is important to ensure your manager/supervisor is aware of the great job you are doing, so why not book one-to-one meetings on a monthly basis with them. It will give you the opportunity to go through what you have achieved that month and the work you are planning to do.

If it's your boss who is the problem and you are not able to have this discussion with them, keep a record of what you are doing and make sure you make copies of reports or important documents you have generated. I have known many bosses to pass off the hard work of others as their own!

As a conclusion I would just like to add this last important point in dealing with workplace trauma, please realise that, **YOU** are not to blame, this is **NOT** your fault, you are **NOT** weak or going mad, and **YES** it can be resolved!