



Media Release

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Bullying at work is rife and attempts to combat it are failing

Almost 50 per cent of Australian employees will experience some form of workplace bullying during their lives, according to the latest research from *beyondblue*.

And between five and 7 per cent will have been bullied in the past six months.

The research found people bullied at work have higher rates of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as physical health problems such as cardiovascular diseases, migraines and obesity.

Witnesses and perpetrators are also at risk of mental health issues, career disruptions and poor job performance.

Bullying is estimated to cost Australian organisations between \$6 billion and \$36 billion a year.

However, the research found traditional methods used to combat bullying are not working and can sometimes make the situation worse.

“Current anti-bullying policies and strategies focus on individuals – the perpetrator and the victim – not the organisational structure and culture that allows the bullying to occur, and sometimes enables it,” said *beyondblue* CEO Georgie Harman.

“Bullying is usually blamed on individuals, or interpersonal problems, or ‘personality clashes’. This is too simplistic. Bullying occurs because of cultural, organisational and structural issues in the workplace.

“Change requires root and branch reform of organisational culture led decisively from the top by committed, unequivocal, strong leaders and managers.”

The research commissioned by *beyondblue* and conducted by the University of Wollongong, combined three processes: a literature review; an online survey of 1528 employees; and a Delphi process in which experts review all available data and literature, draw conclusions and make recommendations.

The national employee survey involved frontline workers, supervisors, managers, business owners, leaders and senior managers across varied gender, age, income and socio-economic backgrounds. It was completed by 55 per cent male, 45 per cent female participants.

“We’ve used these research findings in our Heads Up initiative, providing all employers and employees with advice and tools to build mentally healthy workplaces,” Ms Harman said.

“Sometimes an individual may not recognise the signs of bullying and the research found younger, male employees with less social support at work were at an increased risk.”

In 2012 a House of Representative Committee defined workplace bullying as “repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or a group of workers that creates a risk to health and safety”.

Two key characteristics of workplace bullying are that the behaviour is intended to harm, embarrass, or dominate another individual, and occurs over a prolonged period. It can include direct behaviour such as unreasonable demands, verbal abuse and humiliation and indirect behaviour such as social isolation, withholding information and spreading rumours.

Learn more about how to create mentally healthy workplaces by visiting **Headsup.org.au**. Heads Up is an initiative of *beyondblue* and the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance.

Want to learn more about workplace bullying? Visit www.headsup.org.au/workplacebullying. For online chat visit <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/online-forums>.

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The research also found...

Bullying is likely to occur:

- In stressful, competitive work environments;
- When unreasonable work demands are being made;
- Where leadership is weak or indistinct;
- In organisations with poor communications;
- When roles and responsibilities are ill-defined;
- Where clear policies about workplace bullying are lacking.

The employee survey found workplace bullying increases the risk of mental health conditions such as:

- Depression and anxiety;
- Chronic stress;
- Post-traumatic stress disorder;
- Suicide ideation and suicide behaviours;
- And lower quality of life.

Bullying costs organisations and businesses:

- **Absenteeism:** Victims are significantly more likely to take longer and more frequent bouts of sick leave due to poor health and/or because of a desire to withdraw from the workplace;
- **Presenteeism:** When individuals are physically present but less productive due to poor mental health, disability, or other factors;
- **Lower Job Satisfaction:** Bullied individuals have lower levels of job satisfaction;
- **Turnover Rates:** Bullying causes greater staff turnover which translate into productivity losses;
- **Reputational Harm:** This can affect relationships with customers and suppliers, and also make it more difficult to retain and attract staff;
- **Direct Financial Costs:** Bullying costs Australian employers \$6-\$36 billion each year (Productivity Commission, 2010). Mental health claims cost organisations twice as much as physical claims (Comcare, 2010).

Delphi experts found traditional workplace bullying strategies don't work:

- Existing approaches fail because organisations do not take a long-term, strategic view. Current approaches tend to cause further harm or inconvenience;
- Workplace policies are often unclear and inconsistent with a general lack of communication;
- Individual level approaches may not be effective – a whole of organisation approach is required;
- Mediation is often misused and can exacerbate the situation, particularly when an imbalance of power already exists. The experts indicated mediation tends to be overused.