

**Dr Susan's Guide**  
to  
**SURVIVING THE BULLY AT WORK**



**Are you under attack?**

Are you really under attack? Is it a "personality clash" or is your nose out of joint after being reprimanded at work. Sometimes people think they are bullied, but they aren't. That is a fact.

It is also a fact that you can be bullied. Bullying is not a once-off clash or a fair reprimand. It is typically unfair, humiliating, malicious and vindictive and intended to harm the victim. Furthermore bullying is persistent, prolonged and happens over a period of time and is likely to challenge the physical and emotional health, safety and well being of the individual. The bully has the power to bully – whether the power is sanctioned, perceived or real.

Once you have become the object of the bully's unhealthy interest, it could be the beginning of hard times. At first, you may think that it is temporary and that it will pass soon. But as the days and weeks pass by, you will come to the conclusion that you are dealing dysfunctional behaviour. You will try to adjust, to "handle" the situation and in the trial and error phase you may find that your best intentions could actually make things worse.

The mistake most targets make is to deny their reality when dealing with a workplace bully. Don't try to explain bullying behaviour in logical terms, because it is neither logical nor decent. It is not the same as schoolyard bullying either. This is a different ball game. The silence, shame and denial accompanying workplace bullying are exactly what the bully needs to succeed.

You start doubting yourself. You could even wonder whether you have done something wrong or could at least be partially blamed for the situation. It is always good to do some self-examination and it won't harm you to take stock and remove some of the cobwebs in your life before starting the battle against the bully - BUT do it for you, not for the bully.

Because whatever prompted the bully (most of the time they don't need anything to get them going anyway) you should remember that this is not a personality issue or a personality clash. This is an infringement of your human rights and a denial of your dignity and nothing can justify bullying behaviour. You are entitled to be treated with dignity and respect at all times and believe it or not, you are entitled to happiness at work. It is time to stop the silent epidemic at the workplace.

### **You are not alone!**

Many people are or had been bullied at work. You are not the first or the last person to fall prey to this unsocial behaviour. But this is said not to comfort you - how can you draw comfort from the fact that others are miserable too? I am telling you this so that you realise that, others share your ordeal too - you are not a freak or a misfit. It is very easy to feel odd when you are a target.

Now that you know you are not the odd one out, it is time to find support. A battle with the bully is uphill and you will need your friends and family to stand by you. Oh yes, you will find those that will immediately think that you are doing things wrong with advise on how to handle the bully. The best is to direct them to this website so that they can understand what workplace bullying is and then they will be able to assist you with more knowledge and empathy.

Join a target support group on the Internet and visit other sites on the topic too. Go to the [books](#) section and buy books on workplace bullying and read these. Knowledge is power!

Colleague support is great, but also difficult to find. Many colleagues will make themselves guilty of GroupThink and refuse to differ with the bully (especially if the bully is the boss) or they may just be too scared to support you in case they could become the next victim. But you can rest assured that it is not the first time that your perpetrator bullied someone and you may find valuable advise and support from previous targets and victims or those in the same boat as you.

Support from friends (virtual and otherwise!), family and colleagues are most important - empower them with knowledge and start building your network today!

## **Take good care of yourself**

Bullying has a devastating effect on targets or victims - most people suffer from psychosomatic illnesses after prolonged exposure to emotional abuse and you may even suffer from reactive depression, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS or Yuppie Flu) or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in cases of severe bullying. This is a bleak case scenario, but one of the realities of workplace bullying. It is very important that you take good care of yourself and avoid the situation overwhelming your emotional and physical well being.

There are many good books on stress, but I found The Alexander Technique (see [books](#) section) particularly helpful. Exercises and keeping your posture in a relaxed, functional position is of great help. Learn to breathe correctly and do exercises daily. Pay special attention to the neck and shoulders when exercising. Some of the exercises recommended in The Alexander Technique can be done in the office and behind your desk. Whenever you feel the stress mounting, do the exercises - it won't take the bully away, but it will help you through the day.

Make sure that you get enough sleep. Bullying is draining and you need to sleep well to survive a toxic workplace. If you have difficulty sleeping, try some herbal remedies and don't eat or drink anything after 8 in the evening. Relax with a book or music before going to bed and remember to cuddle something - your hubby, your dog or a soft toy. If you are not involved or married, let a family member or a friend hug you at least once a week - you are only human and we all need affection, especially during a crisis!

## **Diarise events**

The worst case scenario is that you and the bully will eventually have to deal with the matter at a grievance or disciplinary hearing or even at a tribunal. Don't think that it will not get that far. Be alert and keep a diary of events. Small incidents build up - in isolation it may not seem likely to constitute bullying, but courts do take the cumulative effect of these incidents into consideration. Remember that the strongest memory is weaker than the palest ink and you are likely to forget these incidents, especially when

suffering from depression. It is very important to keep a record for your own sake. Fight back!

### **Confront the bully**

The biggest mistake targets make is to avoid confronting the bully. This is not a pleasant prospect, but you have to be firm and you have to fight for your dignity. You need not be aggressive in confronting the bully, just be assertive and make it clear that you will not be treated in such a manner. When you confront the bully, take a reliable witness with you. If necessary, put it in writing and do it face to face too. If the bully belittle your work, humiliate you are try to put the blame on you, stand your ground. Don't be intimidated by the bully's position, tantrums or threats - stand tall on your dignity and give yourself the respect you deserve. If the bully won't back off, tell him or her in no uncertain terms that you will take the matter further.

### **Talk to the bully's boss, if possible**

Unless the bully is the MD, he or she will have a boss too. You must take the matter to the boss - either in an interview or in writing. In this case it is a good idea to take a witness with too. But don't be secretive and tell the bully's boss not to tell the bully that you complained. Then you might as well shut up. Be clear on what you want - a transfer, the bully transferred or a grievance hearing. If you have no joy, put it in writing and keep copies of all correspondence. If your correspondence is ignored, send reminders at regular intervals, requesting a response and referring to your previous correspondence.

### **Grievance hearings**

Grievance hearings are geared towards resolving interpersonal conflict rather than bullying and because of a lack of knowledge on the part of management, many victims don't find any joy at such hearings. In many cases, management would side with the bully, who may be a person in a senior position. Don't put all your hope for justice on the grievance hearing, but this is an alternative you will have to explore before going onto more drastic steps.

## **Medical records**

At this point your medical records may become very relevant. If you had been seeing your GP or psychologist about stress-related illnesses or if you are undergoing treatment for depression and stress as a result of the workplace bullying, these records are important. Most countries' laws - whether under the health and safety act or under labour laws - require that the employer provide a safe and healthy place of work. These relate to emotional health and safety too. Your employer can be brought to book for jeopardising your emotional health and safety by allowing the bullying and find them ultimately in the position of paying huge sums of money for not protecting employees.

## **Assistance**

At this point you may want to consider legal advice. There are labour law consultants and attorneys (other countries may have different titles) in South Africa who can advise you on how to go about solving your workplace problem. It is very important to find a good legal representative, but be careful in finding the right person. Some legal eagles gear their business towards corporate clients (it is big money) and may even hope to impress your employer with their "skills" in order to get an account. In the process they may let you down. Spend some time to investigate the prospective representatives before making a choice. Find a legal representative that cares for employees, have ample experience in labour law and preferably specialise in labour law.

## **Disciplinary hearings**

It is also possible that the bully will drag you to a disciplinary hearing. At this point you should have consulted a legal representative and have this person assist you at the hearing if necessary. Depending on circumstances in the organisation and whether management is open or protects the bully, the disciplinary hearings can, like grievance hearings go wrong because of alliances in the organisation. It is not fool-proof and the chances are 50/50

that you will get a fair hearing. However, this remains one of the safeguards provided for in the law to ensure that every possible effort had been made to solve the issue internally.

## **Tribunals**

A tribunal is an independent hearing - in the case of South Africa, by a commissioner of the Council for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) or a Bargaining Council but there is also no guarantee that you will be successful.

We all celebrate when someone had been successful at a hearing but statistics indicate the opposite. Very few people are successful and I recommend that you only pursue this option if:

- you have overwhelming evidence, preferably in writing
- good legal presentation – check the legal representative’s past successes and talk to previous clients
- reliable witnesses
- that you are not too emotionally wounded and that you are very clear in your recollection of events
- that you do not have any skeletons in your cupboard that could damage your case (e.g. a record of bad performance)
- that you are being truthful at all times and are not influenced or pressurised by others

Workplace Bullying is not defined in the law books. Another problem is that victims sometimes forget what happened or may at times suffer from amnesia and therefore appear not be reliable as witnesses. Time lapse may play a role and witnesses are hard to find – after all, your colleagues simply would not want to sacrifice their careers for you. There are few people who are strong enough to do this for another person – this is the harsh reality. When legal presentation is poor, you could be doomed.

It is important to remember that a tribunal is not a money-making racket, but that it is there to see that you and the employer are treated fairly and that, if they rule in your favour, you be compensated for losses. But presiding officers and commissioners are human beings with likes and dislikes and could make mistakes and you may need to appeal if they rule in favour of the perpetrator. Understand the risks – while we would like to see justice, these cases tend to go the way of the best legal presentation and the strongest evidence. Your case must be waterproof. Do your homework and don’t take risks.

## When it carries on

But what if the bullying carries on and there is no way out, you've tried all the avenues and it is too difficult or cumbersome to prove your case? Although I firmly believe that you have to fight back, expect setbacks but never give up, I also believe that it is not worth the damage should your emotional and physical health deteriorate to the extent that you become dysfunctional. Some people resign, giving their reasons clearly and then go to the department of labour to claim constructive dismissal, or find another job and resign. These are options and resignation is not recommended if you are not comfortable with the idea that you may not find another job again, it is a last resort - ultimately, you cannot let a toxic environment destroy you. Fight it to the bitter end, but don't let it destroy you and get out as soon as you can, but be sensible about your financial position.

## Personal empowerment and survival tips

### You are more resilient than you think...

I advised a victim some time ago:

*Thought I'd let you have some extracts on empowerment from Corporate Hyenas at Work for the group's benefit. Although we use the term fighting, this includes empowerment and professional help - anything that will help the victim turn to victor is part of the fight and Gary and Ruth are rightly concerned about the woman's ability to deal with the problem while she is in tears even before going to work. Here are some excerpts that could be useful and you and the other victims:*

*p117*

*"FROM SURVIVAL TO EMPOWERMENT: Thousands of years ago, the San (Bushmen) realised that the only way people stood some chance against the hyena during a hunting trip was to be taller than the animal". (Children were not allowed to hunt with parents unless they were at least a head taller) "Today this age-old truth still applies at the workplace. Mental, and not physical power is required when you are locked in a battle for survival.*

*There is a lot to be learnt from observing animals in nature when the fight for survival is on. When endangered, they run for dear life.*

*Without any training or guidance they also know not to run in a different direction from the rest of the pack". (Collective bargaining, standing together and caring for one another) "They instinctively know there is safety in numbers. When the hunt is over, even if one of their members did become a victim, they regroup and continue with their daily lives. They also know that the strongest and the swiftest will survive and that special protection is necessary for the young. Animals know we live in the beauty and dangers of our world"*

*p 120*

**STAY ALIVE**

*"When lions are injured, they muster their last bit of strength to stay alive and keep the hyenas at bay. They take shelter in a safe place to recover in isolation, and join with the pack when they are well again. This lesson applies to the Corporate Ecosystem too".*

*"When a Corporate Hyena is after your blood, survival becomes top priority, even if it means that you have to spend time in strange and inconvenient places".*

*"Remember that even strong predators like lions take shelter in trees should they be outnumbered by hyenas. Don't be proud or preoccupied with and concerned about your image when your general well-being and financial survival are at stake."*

*"Take "shelter" if necessary. Don't do, say or sign anything foolish. Work wisely with your emotional resources. To stay alive is your responsibility. To fight back is your right"*

*p118*

*"Studies relating to the role of personal factors in people who survived tragedies and setbacks have identified certain attitudes, beliefs and values, together with a strong conviction of their own ability to overcome it. They also seemed to have a positive approach to life and the will to overcome adversity. Once again, look at the recovery process in nature. If a thorn tree is damaged, it uses its own gum as ointment in the healing process over a period of time. The scars are the only reminders.*

*Healing is in our hands. With the right attitude and using the remedies life itself provides. Tragedy does not mean the end of the road. It can lead to new territory, new problems, new challenges, possibilities and opportunities. It takes bold courage, but through the centuries many people have dared to do it.*



*To bounce back from adversity is the ideal attitude. For most people, handling setbacks is a gradual, step-by-step process".....  
"When experiencing a setback at work, try the following*

- *see things for what they are - put it behind you as soon as possible*
  - *don't let your world crumble*
  - *go to gym or do something to vent your frustrations*
  - *rise above your circumstances*
  - *live for today*
  - *realise that the situation is temporary "this too will pass"*
  - *react positively to rays of sunlight during these dark days*
  - *never give up.*
- ... and perhaps on a very personal note, during my darkest days I made the song "Just hold on tight to your dreams" my personal slogan and I never stopped singing the phrase. Pick a song or a slogan and believe in it.*

### ***Nothing beats determination.***

*And remember, **you are stronger and more resilient than you think**: very few people ever scratch the surface of their ability, many go through life without ever discovering themselves - make this a time to discover your strengths. We've watched a baboon in a tree being threatened by a jaguar. The baboon did not have a chance, but then he jumped to the thinnest branch and hung on there because he knew that if the jaguar tried to get hold of him there, the jaguar would fall. Create safe havens for yourselves, as a group and as individuals.*

*Hope this gives you courage for the battle.*

- Remember that you are more than your job. Don't define yourself in terms of the position you hold. It is dangerous. According to Richard Bolles ("What is the colour of your Parachute") we are all likely to lose a job to retrenchment or dismissal at least two times in our careers.
- Get a theme song like that crazy TV character, Ally McBeal. When the bully gets you down, replay this in your mind for empowerment. Choose an encouraging slogan for yourself like "I never give up" and if you have a cartoon to go with it, even better. Put it in a prominent place and live it!

- When you feel that you cannot cope, visit a psychiatrist or psychologist and ask them to help you strengthen your resilience to fight the bully or talk to friends and loved ones. Having support and someone listening to you as very important.
- Take a break and don't stay at home. Get in touch with nature, go for long walks, see the sun rise, hear the waves break... get in touch with nature to heal from the hurt.
- Read about workplace bullying.
- Visualise yourself as being protected against the bully. Many believers visualise a protection by a Deity from your religious background and belief system - this is powerful in reducing the hurt inflicted by the bully.
- Don't be bitter and don't hate. Get rid of your anger and hate the behaviour, not the person doing it to you.
- Find strength in your spirituality or faith and believe that you will grow from the experience - and you will.
- If the system (grievance hearing, disciplinary hearing or tribunal) failed you, don't be despondent - keep on fighting, know when to give and do it for your own and others' sake.