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for you and your family

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PROGRAM

Be aware of—and act against—bullying

Upon a departmental reorganization, Angela found herself working for a new boss. Angela had been with the organization for nearly 15 years and had a solid reputation. The director was relatively new, however, and seemed threatened by Angela's knowledge and status. Angela soon found herself singled out for harsh criticism, micro-management, badgering and even insults by this director, who at one point said, "Things were good until you got here." Angela was quite uncertain of how to resolve this situation.

We now know more than ever about the devastating long-term effects that bullying can have on victims—whether the bullying happens at school, in the workplace or online.

Children, teens and adults can all be the victims of abusive behavior. Regardless of their age, victims often suffer with long-lasting stress, anxiety, depression, and a range of uncomfortable physical symptoms. For children, bullying can lead to avoidance of school. (Every day, approximately 160,000 children in the U.S. miss school, fearing intimidation or attack.) Bullying can also lead to retaliation violence, and sometimes even to suicide.

Awareness of bullying has increased, but victims still suffer. More and more institutions have now adopted anti-bullying policies. However, not all organizations are as responsive as they should be to this widespread problem. Whatever the setting for the bullying, its victims often feel isolated and may not know what they can do to stop the abusive behavior.

Standing up to bullying can be effective. Although there's rarely an easy remedy for bullying, victims can take some concrete steps to protect themselves while seeking the punishment that a bully often deserves. Parents, schools, other institutions and law enforcement can work together to help establish a zero-tolerance environment for bullying in the community.

Angela contacted her ParTNers EAP, seeking confidential advice. Over the phone, a licensed counselor recommended that Angela begin documenting incidents of the manager's abusive language for submission to the organization's HR department. As the abuse continued, Angela compiled a listing of harsh statements and intrusive behaviors on the part of the director. She decided to use the face to face counseling the EAP offers to develop a plan on how to move forward. She appreciated that there was a confidential place to turn.

Bullies come in all shapes, sizes and ages. They wreak their interpersonal damage in many different settings. Bullies take advantage of what they see as other people's vulnerabilities or differences. In order to compensate for their own deep insecurities, they use the tools of intimidation and manipulation to bring others down.

As **National Bullying Prevention Month**, October is a time to consider the destructive effects of bullying in social, educational and electronic communication settings. Those who are victims of abuse often need support to help them overcome their isolation and assert their right to a safe environment.

If you or a family member struggle with a bullying situation, know that you are not alone. Your ParTNers EAP is available to provide resources and expert ideas to help you respond to very difficult situations such as bullying. Call toll-free **1.855.Here4TN (1.855.437.3486)** 24/7 or visit the ParTNers EAP website at www.HERE4TN.com.



Can there really be a bully at work?

Bullying doesn't just affect young people. It's also common in the workplace. National studies have shown that approximately 25 – 35 percent of U.S. workers have been the target of abusive conduct at work.

Bullying is behavior meant to frighten, control, offend or humiliate another person. It is not limited to physical abuse. While bullies may be peers, they are often bosses or people of higher seniority in the organization than the victim. If not addressed, bullying behavior can lead to a sharp decline in employee morale and productivity. It can also cause great psychological and physical distress to the victim.

Examples of workplace bullying

- Spreading hurtful rumors or gossip
- Excluding or isolating someone
- Undermining or sabotaging a person's work
- Assigning unreasonable deadlines or workloads to cause stress
- Intruding on a person's privacy by pestering, spying or stalking (this can include electronic communications such as email, text messages and social media)
- Yelling or using profanity
- Threatening or perpetrating physical abuse.

Steps to combat bullying

- **Don't allow yourself to be an easy target.** Either in person or by email, firmly tell the offender that his or her behavior must stop. If you're approaching the person at some time after an attack, you may want to ask a supervisor or HR person to accompany you.
- **Document every instance of bullying behavior.** Keep a written journal with the date, time and event description. Include names of any witnesses; multiple witnesses to bullying can strengthen your case when reported to HR and management.
- **Build a well-secured evidence file.** In a safe location, keep copies of any inappropriate memos, emails, or texts received from the person.
- **Do not retaliate.** Yelling back at a bully could complicate and escalate the situation. Try to remain calm and professional.
- **Report the harassment to your supervisor or Human Resources.** Don't delay in speaking up. File a formal complaint if necessary to get action. If your concerns are brushed off, don't hesitate to go to the next level of management.
- **Preserve your safety and well-being.** If you believe that the organization's response is not effective, and you continue to be at risk for bullying, consider making a job change. Everyone deserves a safe working environment; in fact, the Tennessee state legislature in 2014 passed the Healthy Workplace Act to help prevent bullying at work.

If your child might be a victim

If you suspect that your child might be struggling with a bully-related issue:

- Be alert for dramatic behavior changes in your child such as appearing depressed or withdrawn from friends and family, avoiding previously enjoyed activities, or hesitation to attend school. You may see torn clothing or bruises, and your child may exhibit decreased appetite or sleep problems.
- Keep the dialogue open. Ask your child each day about peer relations and any problems he or she may have. Bullied children are often too embarrassed to report abuse, so it's vital to listen closely.
- Develop a safety strategy. Equip your child with tactics to stay safe. Teach nonviolent ways to deal with bullies, like walking away or talking out issues.
- Take the situation seriously. Promptly inform the school administration that your child has been bullied. Insist on a no-tolerance policy for bullying at school.
- If a child is struggling with the effects of bullying, a mental health professional such as a psychologist or social worker can help them build resilience and confidence. Contact ParTNers EAP for confidential assistance.



The effects of bullying over time

Whereas some believe that intimidation in the schoolyard or via text message is relatively harmless, studies have shown that many people—both victims and the bullies themselves—suffer long-term harm. Studies examining more than just health-related problems provide an expansive view of the destructive impact of bullying.

People who were exposed to bullying or were perpetrators of bullying as children:

- Are at greater risk for health problems as adults. They are over six times more likely to be diagnosed with a serious illness, smoke regularly, or develop a psychiatric disorder compared to those not involved in bullying.
- Are more than twice as likely to have difficulty keeping a job or saving money than those not involved in bullying. They are more likely to struggle financially in young adulthood.
- Show signs of having difficulty forming social relationships, particularly maintaining long-term friendships or having good ties with parents in adulthood.

Combating online bullying

To help young people combat cyberbullying:

- **Tell them not to get drawn in.** Children should not respond if someone sends a mean or threatening message, or posts something offensive—no matter how hurtful the communication is.
- **Save evidence.** A child should not erase bullying messages, posts or pictures. They should be saved as evidence and shared with a trusted adult or authority.
- **Encourage children to report online threats.** If they can identify the bully, consider contacting his/her parents and the school as appropriate. Many schools have procedures for handling cyberbullying.
- **Reward the reporting.** Don't threaten to withdraw phone access or otherwise punish a child who has reported cyberbullying; instead, praise him or her.
- **Minimize communication from the cyberbully.** Block their cellphone number and delete them from social media contacts.
- **File a complaint.** Inappropriate posts may violate the terms and conditions of communications providers and social networking sites. Notify them with copies of the offensive posts.
- **Involve law enforcement.** Report any threats of harm and inappropriate sexual messages to local police. In many cases, the cyberbully's abusive actions can be prosecuted by law.

Sources for this issue: Workplace Bullying Institute, National Crime Prevention Council, Association for Psychological Science, National Education Association.