

## **Workplace Abuse: Are You a Victim?**

### **What to Look For and What to Do**

By Kate Lorenz, CareerBuilder.com Editor

Most workers have endured arduous jobs or difficult bosses at one time or another in their careers. But unfortunately, there are many workers whose situations go beyond "challenging" and can only be characterized as "abusive."

"Abuse mostly happens to people who are very conscientious, trying to please and trying to get along," says Lyssa Menard, Ph.D., clinical psychologist in the Wellness Institute at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago. "The two types of workers at greatest risk for abuse are either the ones who accommodate too much, or those who refuse to conform," Dr. Menard explains.

"The ones who do not conform usually will leave the situation fairly quickly and find a new job. The person who tries to accommodate, however, will stick it out longer and take the abuse," Dr. Menard says. This was the case with Laura.

Laura was excited about her new job. Her boss was energetic, charismatic and the position paid well. "Everything was perfect... for about a year," Laura recalls. "Then the abuse began." Laura endured constant screaming, belittling comments and continued threats that her boss would sabotage her career, as he said he did when another employee complained and left.

"He was abusive with others, but I was his main target because I was so loyal. I know people might think, 'Why did you stay?' I am an intelligent, educated professional. But he would always apologize profusely and knew exactly what to say to manipulate people. At first, I made excuses for him, but then I was afraid to leave because I didn't want him to trash my career."

"The abuse usually starts subtly and slowly begins to intensify," Menard contends. "It whittles away at one's self esteem and ability to take action. It breaks the victims' will and limits their ability to look for a job and therefore leave the situation. And the longer they have been abused, the harder it is to leave."

Dr. Menard outlines these types of workplace abuse:

\*Verbal: screaming; public humiliation; belittling

\*Non-verbal: subtle discrimination; getting the "silent treatment;" intimidation and threat

\*Work-related: ever-increasing workload; increased workload with decreased responsibilities

\*Being told to perform illegal actions on behalf of the company

\*Sexual harassment

\*Physical abuse

If you think you are a victim of workplace abuse, what can you do?

1. Get out. Things will never change, so the sooner you get a new job, the better.
2. Educate yourself. Try to identify the type of abuser you are dealing with and get as much information about that personality type as possible. This will help you deal with the situation until you can leave.
3. Keep records of everything. Save e-mails and voice mails. Write down incidents in a date book. Cell phones are handy for recording and photographing documentation.

4. Know your rights. Contact your professional association or a lawyer to find out your rights as an employee of your company. Then you must weigh your options on whether you feel the situation is worth fighting legally.

5. Develop a social network. Focusing on events outside of work is important to help you regain some balance in your life.

6. Consider therapy. Consult a professional to get you through this dark period and help you regain your self-esteem.

Kate Lorenz is the article and advice editor for CareerBuilder.com. She researches and writes about job search strategy, career management, hiring trends and workplace issues.

Copyright 2006 CareerBuilder.com.