

# How a Toxic Work Environment Affects Your Mental Health

By Allison Abrams, LCSW-R | Updated on May 23, 2022

✓ Medically reviewed by Carly Snyder, MD

Not only is incivility in the workplace on the rise, but according to a recent study, it is compromising one of our most critical assets—our [mental health](#).

The authors of the study, published in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, looked at the correlation between toxicity in the workplace and symptoms of insomnia, a common symptom of clinical depression. They wanted to know how, or via which mechanism, incivility in the workplace negatively affected employees' sleep quality, as there has been limited research into this factor.

*On May 19, 2022, Verywell Mind hosted a virtual Mental Health in the Workplace webinar, hosted by Editor-in-Chief Amy Morin, LCSW. If you missed it, check out this recap to learn ways to foster supportive work environments and helpful strategies to improve your well-being on the job.*

## What Is Workplace Incivility?

Workplace civility, as described by McKinsey and Company, is “the accumulation of thoughtless actions that leave employees feeling disrespected—intentionally ignored, undermined by colleagues, or publicly belittled by an insensitive manager.”

It has also been defined as “low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect.”

## Why Quality of Sleep Matters

Sleep is a critical factor in our overall well-being, including our work performance. It has long been established that poor quality of sleep has significant implications for both our physical and psychological well-being.

For example, insufficient sleep increases a person's risk of developing serious medical conditions, including obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. Additionally, lack of sleep over time has been associated with a shortened lifespan.

## Effects of Negative Rumination

In examining the indirect effects of workplace incivility on symptoms of insomnia and thus overall health, the determining mechanism was found to be *negative rumination*, or the mentally replaying of an event or disturbing interaction with a co-worker long after the workday has ended.

"Workplace toxicity leads to adverse effects in part by stimulating people to ruminate on their negative work experiences," according to the authors. "Negative rumination represents an active cognitive preoccupation with work events, either in an attempt to solve work problems or anticipate future work problems."

Given that most of us spend the better part of our days and our energy at work, increasing hostility in the workplace doesn't bode well for our emotional or physical well-being. Research over the past 20 years has associated toxic work environments with increased depression, substance use, and health issues among employees. Further research has shown that organizations are suffering as well. Some of these adverse effects include decreased productivity, lower levels of employee commitment and increased turnover.

## Coping Techniques to Reduce Effects of Workplace Incivility

The good news is that sufficient recovery or coping techniques may be able to mitigate the negative effects of a toxic work environment on employee well-being. In particular, relaxation and psychological detachment. The ability to psychologically detach from work during non-work hours and relaxation were shown to be the two mitigating factors that determined how workers were affected or not by a negative work environment.

Employees who were better able to detach psychologically are able to relax after work and sleep better even in the face of workplace incivility. Below are descriptions of these recovery experiences and how they were shown to reduce the negative effects and enable employees to thrive in the most toxic of work environments.

## Psychological Detachment

Psychological detachment represents an avoidance of work-related thoughts, actions or emotions. Some of the items used in the study to measure employees' levels of psychological detachment in the evenings including the following: "I didn't think about work at all" and "I distanced myself from my work." Those who were able to detach themselves mentally from this cycle do not suffer as much sleep disruption as those who are less capable of detachment.

Detachment can be fostered through a variety of specific activities, including exercise. Planning future events such as vacations or weekend outings with family or friends are examples of positive distractions outside of work.

## Relaxation

It should come as no surprise that prioritizing work-life balance was shown to be another effective buffer against the detrimental effects of workplace incivility. Relaxation has long been associated with fewer health complaints and less exhaustion and need for recovery.

As hypothesized by the authors of the study, relaxation during non-work time served as an important moderator of the relationship between negative work rumination and insomnia symptoms. Additionally, it has been identified as a moderator between work characteristics and occupational well-being, between time demands and exhaustion, and between job insecurity and the need for recovery from work. Relaxation provides an opportunity for individuals to halt work-related demands, which is critical for restoring individuals to their pre-stressor state.

Some activities outside of the office that can foster recovery include volunteering, meditation, taking a walk, listening to music, and spending time with friends and other positive social supports.

### **Press Play for Advice On Dealing With a Toxic Workplace**

Hosted by Editor-in-Chief and therapist Amy Morin, LCSW, this episode of The Verywell Mind Podcast, featuring business expert Heather Monahan, shares how to survive a toxic

workplace. Click below to listen now.

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## How Organizations Can Address Workplace Incivility

Based on the results of the study, the authors suggest the following interventions that companies can address to reduce workplace incivility.

- Raise awareness
- Ensure protection for employees
- Ensure accountability
- Train and model appropriate behavior
- Train supervisors on aggression-prevention behaviors
- Improve emotional resilience skills
- Offer training on recovery from work, mindfulness practices, emotional/social intelligence skills

## A Word From Verywell

You may not be able to control certain events during work hours or the characteristics of your workplace environment. However, what you do have control over is how you choose to cope. Most importantly, finding time to relax, spending time with friends and family, and engaging in activities that will shift your focus away from work during non-work hours.

If you find that you are still experiencing distressful symptoms and that they are interfering with your functioning, it may be a good idea to speak to a therapist who can help you learn additional strategies for coping.

If despite having done all you can still nothing has changed, it might be time to consider the possibility of removing yourself from the toxic environment and looking for a new, more fulfilling and less distressful job. Your health may depend on it.

6 Sources

Verywell Mind uses only high-quality sources, including peer-reviewed studies, to support the facts within our articles. Read our editorial process to learn more about how we fact-check and keep our content accurate, reliable, and trustworthy.

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### Additional Reading

- Demsky CA, Fritz C, Hammer LB, Black AE. Workplace incivility and employee sleep: The role of rumination and recovery experiences. *J Occup Health Psychol*. 2018. doi: 10.1037/ocp0000116.