

Working in fear

Weeks after completing my degree I walked with a spring in my step into my first job in magazine publishing. Less than six months later, I cleared my desk and left, my confidence in the soles of my shoes. It was my first experience with workplace bullying. The office accounts manager Yvette, criticised my clothes, my voice, the way I looked at people ("It's rude to stare!") and even my choice of boyfriends. If I asked for her help, she'd bark at me.

When I tried to make a friendly conversation, she'd cut me dead. I was criticized openly for such serious crimes as taking phone messages for the receptionist when she was away from her desk. After six months, I resigned and took a job in a call centre for a low hourly wage. It wasn't the most exciting job in the world, but at least my colleagues were nice. My self-esteem was hurt, however, and it took me several months to get my career back on track.

Now the British government has turned its attention to the impact bullying can have in the workplace. The government plans to invest 1 million in a survey of the issue led by the trade union Amicus. Trade and Industry Secretary Patricia Hewitt called workplace bullying a "terrible issue with terrible consequences". According to Cary Cooper, professor of organizational psychology and health at Lancaster University management school as many as one in ten people were bullied at work in the past six months alone. The figure rises to one in four if one looks back over the past five years. Cooper defines bullying as the "persistent demeaning, devaluing and harassment of an individual" and says that unreasonable workloads, unrealistic deadlines, public reprimands and constant fault-finding are common aspects of bullying behaviour.

Anita Mahon suffered such treatment for nearly four years while working as a marketing assistant. "There was an inner circle that included the chief executive and several directors," Mahon says. "If you were in favour, you might be drawn into the circle for a while, but you'd be dropped the minute you stepped out of line." For Mahon and her colleagues, work resembled a boot camp. Workers had to ask to use the toilet and were even told with whom they could and could not eat lunch.

Mahon's confidence suffered. "My manager made a big thing of the fact that I didn't have a degree. "You'll never get another job without one," she'd told me. After a while, I began to believe it" Mahon says.

It was only later that she realized the impact that bullying had had on her health. She had suffered from skin problems, hair loss, weight fluctuations and frequent headaches. "I've been in my current job for eight months, and I haven't had a day's sick leave" she says. "In that other job, I took up to three weeks a

year."

On average, bullied employees take seven days more sick leave than others, says Professor Cooper. And because of sickness, absence and unhappiness, they are able to achieve only around 70 per cent of their potential - which makes bullying very costly for employers. In addition to the physical symptoms, victims of bullying may also experience increased anxiety depression, loss of self-confidence and a sense of powerlessness, and they will tend to blame themselves.

It is not just the victims who suffer. Their colleagues, too, are affected by what Cooper calls "passive bullying", which can affect their emotional and physical health.