

The Grown Up Bully in the Workplace



Bullying isn't just for kids. Bullies can be grown - ups – who try to intimidate others through power at work. They take on various forms, they may yell, berate, or use passive-aggressive tactics to chip away at your self-esteem little by little, until you start to doubt your abilities. As adults we have to wonder why we would let such behaviors affect us; after all we are no longer children on the playground. It is easy to get hooked into bullying behavior at work because there is typically a power dynamic among employees within a workplace culture. There is also a sense of interdependency among co-workers/supervisors due to economic and financial needs.

What is the difference between the child and adult bully? Not too much. They both use power over others-and have a keen ability to assess weaknesses and vulnerabilities in others. Once they establish a weakness, they prey on others to establish control. They both also have arrested development-meaning they have not fully developed into confident adults who can regulate their emotions and actions in a healthy manner.

If someone is being bullied it is the best practice to report the behavior to the human resources department or report the issues to an immediate supervisor. Employment law is evolving; there are more anti-harassment and anti-bullying policies now. In a perfect world, bad behavior would not be tolerated, however there are some instances where people cannot be protected or they have to remain in a position for financial reasons. The following article will discuss bullying behaviors in specific categories. These categories are not exhaustive, yet describe some common behaviors that have been reported in the literature and in clinical practice scenarios. The sub-types can be replaced with either gender. It is the hope of the author, that this brief article can provide some short term strategies to “disempower” bullying behavior while more comprehensive strategies can be explored.

Scary Mary:



Mary has a reputation for being abrasive and mean-spirited. People walk on egg shells around Mary because she has no qualms about expressing “explosive behavior” when she dislikes something. Mary throws “adult tantrums”-she will yell, throw things, swear and act like a child because she feels entitled to do so. Her attitude is punitive toward others-she believes others need to be confronted in order to get things done. Mary is also critical of others-assuming others are lazy or incompetent. One of the advantages she has in being “scary” is that she can delegate more often and hide behind her ugly behavior. Mary is good at appearing busy and productive all the time, but she can be a tad lazy behind closed doors. After all, it is easier just to ‘do what she says” and not make waves to avoid the wrath of her tantrums. Mary can have traits similar to a perpetrator of domestic violence, to the outside world (visitors, other contacts outside of her work) she can appear friendly, but behind closed doors has the “Jekyll and Hyde” complex.

Coping Strategies for Mary

Mary sniffs out her victims from the first day she meets them. She will test you to see how you react. Remember playground politics. Why do children bully? Because they think they can. When you are around Mary, walk with confidence, use strong eye contact and display as much confidence as possible. When she displays outbursts in front of you early on-be assertive-but NOT aggressive. If you are too passive and look scared, she may target you. If you are too aggressive, she may view that as a challenge to fight with you again-to be the “alpha employee.” You must give the message that you do not tolerate tantrums and you do not play that game. Even if she does make you nervous-FAKE IT and pretend you are not. You can do that by making statements such as “it appears you are really angry and I prefer to communicate with employees in a more calm setting” or “this kind of anger does not suit my professional style, I would like to follow up with you at a later time.” The trick with Mary is to display that you just don’t want to play that game because it is not your style (basically you choose to be more rational). Most likely, she will not give up on your first try. She may see if she can wear you down. Keep using the same technique (in therapy we call this the broken record technique) by removing yourself from the situation and prompting her that you will not participate. You may need to be aggressive and state “this feels verbally abusive to me and this is not acceptable” and leave the room. If you get really gutsy, you can use some comic relief, such as “Mary, I am just not an angry person, I like to keep my blood pressure down” or some other comment which hints to the fact that you choose to take care of yourself. Mary’s behavior needs to be documented and reported to your supervisor or human resources if it does not cease. Try not to let her obnoxious behavior hurt you too much-shrink her down mentally to a child on the playground throwing a tantrum-she still feels out of control and is like a 9 year old trapped in an adult’s body-you don’t have to play with her anymore because you are grown up now.

Know It All Saul



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Saul is not as scary as Mary-but can be tough to manage. Saul needs to feel validated by being the best at everything. Saul insults others when he feels threatened. For example, a new employee may start who has a stronger skill set and he will attempt to dominate discussions around this employee. Saul will gloat about his training and knowledge and will disagree with you in front of others when he feels compromised. Saul is not a team player and wants people to follow his ideas. He will not yell and swear like Mary, but he will confront you inappropriately. When you are around Saul, you may feel like you are testifying in court-always having to prove yourself. Saul will have no problem telling you that your ideas are "incorrect or wrong." Saul also interrupts when others speak and dominates group discussions. Saul also watches closely for someone to make a mistake so he can point out that you were wrong and he has the "correct answer". Another difficult behavior might be his need to be a tattletale. If you make a mistake or are late to work, Saul's antennae will be out and he may report your mistake to your boss. Sometimes it may be more passive aggressive, such as "I am worried about John, he keeps coming to work late every day." Saul is the grown up teacher's pet who just has not learned to validate himself on his own. His worth is measured by being the smartest one in the crowd. In other words-he has not learned to self-soothe his insecurities. He does not have the capacity to listen to his own voice-but has to be approved by others to feel "Ok." He is more comfortable with the sound of his own voice-because he believes the more he hears himself talk the more positive attention he will receive. The unfortunate part is that Saul does not realize the more he talks about his knowledge-the more people grow tired of

him-and the more condescending he appears. When he senses that people do not acknowledge him (or may be pulling away from him), he just wants to talk more and more and wants to look even more superior to others..you can see where this cycle becomes problematic...

Coping Skills for Saul

Saul is not easy to be around because he appears to be egocentric. Believe it or not, Saul is most likely insecure. The first step is to see him for what he really is-a very conflicted person who tortures himself due to his need for constant approval. The worst thing you can do with Saul is challenge him and get into a sparring match of words. This technique will only feed into his cycle of needing to further prove himself-and he will prepare a dozen more ways to display his superiority for the next day-and you will all suffer the price. Why not give him what he wants and be done with it? If it is really validation he needs to stop dominating everyone around him, it is sometimes helpful to join with him instead of fighting with him. For example, "Thanks Saul for your insights, these are helpful." Or...'Saul, I appreciate you sharing this new perspective, I will take that into consideration." The more he feels that his ideas are important-the more likely it is that he will hush a bit more until the next round. Of course, as his therapist I would not take that approach because I would want him to manage this behavior differently, but if he were my co-worker, I would do everything I could to make my days as manageable as possible. Another technique I teach my clients is called "prediction" meaning instead of getting uptight before a meeting with Saul asking yourself "how many times is he going to do something annoying today"- tell yourself, I predict Saul will speak at least 10 times in the meeting-and as he meets this goal-check them off in your head-one by one-and gently laugh to yourself-this helps the feelings of frustration. After all, if you are confident in what you do-why do you have to get into a power struggle with Saul? The most important aspect is not to let a know it all type impact your self-esteem. The teacher's pet has some issues that have nothing to do with you-so don't own them....

Status Gladys



Gladys and Saul have some similarities, yet Gladys also needs to know that she is superior in every way-not just in knowledge or 'getting the answer right." Gladys is all about status. Gladys wants to make sure everyone knows she went to the best school, had the best training, is the most attractive and has the most expensive and fashionable clothes. Gladys may not be as aggressive as Mary or Saul, but she is challenging to be around because she reminds you of the quintessential high school snob who you never liked but are now forced to be with twenty years later. Gladys might make a comment like "Oh wow, I was not even aware your college had a Master's degree" or "I am so glad I was trained by Dr. Jones-the best in his field" or "Your clients appear to like you a lot, but it is really just because you do not have the clinical training to confront them-but you will get there eventually." Gladys likes to be noticed for her good looks (whether that is true or her own delusion) and likes to feel sexy and in shape. She may be judgmental of others and 'feel sorry" for people who don't look as good as her. Gladys never grew past the developmental level of adolescence. She might be forty, but she still thinks she is in the "in-crowd" and does not hesitate to make inappropriate comments to people that she feels are below her level. In her own narcissistic way, she thinks she is being helpful when she "challenges" people to be on her level. She believes that others can benefit from her status and what is even more challenging is that she does not have any motivation to change. If she is confronted, she assumes people are just "jealous" and resentful of her elevated status.

Coping Skills for Gladys

The good news is that we are no longer in high school and most people do not care about the “In-Crowd”-as a matter of fact, most people think that whole concept is funny once you grow up. Gladys can project a lot of power because her behavior is so outlandish it is difficult to ignore. The first coping skill is not to mentally hook into the need to defend you with Gladys. Gladys needs to be the smartest, best looking and most prestigious in the room-and you will never measure up in her eyes. The harder you try to be accepted, the more energized she will become to “one up you.” Be careful, Gladys likes to build a little empire around her. She draws people in when you first meet her in a seductive manner. She will try to make you feel special-but once she has you hooked, she will start to insult you, in subtle ways. If she does not have an audience, she cannot be the at the top-so watch out....stay out of that clique-because you cannot have membership unless you want to be on the bottom rung of the status ladder. Another coping skill is to be aware of your own strengths and display them when confronted by Gladys. For example if Gladys says “I feel badly that you graduated from that program because they do have that great of a reputation” don’t be defensive, say something like “ Oh, I would not feel concerned Gladys, I am really confident with my education and even more confident with my ability to apply it in the real world.” Be short, sweet and to the point-don’t give her too much info about you. Bottom line-Gladys is tiring to be around and when we are adults, we get to choose who we sit with in the cafeteria and who we share our lives with. Don’t give her too much power because she is not that significant in your life.

NO CLUE STEW



Stew is really not a bully-but he can resemble one. Poor Stew-his biggest problem is that he does not “have a clue.” Stew makes inappropriate comments-maybe sexist or racist jokes-without a clue that he could be offending others. Stew has no self-awareness. The other difficult thing about him is that he does not understand why others don’t think he is funny-or why others don’t understand his opinion. Stew has tunnel vision-he cannot see life through anyone’s life experience but his own. He has a sheltered view of the world. If he thinks something is funny-he just says it-without using a filter. If he thinks something is important-he just blurts things out, even if the timing is inappropriate. If he swears at home, he thinks he can also use profanity at work. If he does not understand something, he thinks the rest of the room also does not understand-so before clarifying, he impulsively says “this is stupid” or “no one understands this” when most others do indeed understand. He interrupts and monopolizes meetings with his impulsive behavior. Stew can be immature and does not think about consequences. He probably talks when others are talking and may be perpetually late. He thinks others should just dismiss his behavior and he would tell you “this is just how I act-this is me”- even if “me” is annoying and disruptive to those around him. Stew is usually a decent person deep down and ironically could be upset if you told him that his comments offended you. He might want to take you out for happy hour to make amends-but then the following day would have the same behavior that offended you-not because he is trying to be a bully-but because he cannot internalize well-and simply because he is “No Clue Stew.”

Coping Skills for Stew

Stew most likely will not change because you ask him to-but do not take it personally. Stew has underdeveloped emotional intelligence. He does not intend to be harmful, but if you are not careful, you may find yourself becoming his personal life coach/counselor-which may take away from your work duties and free time. Sometimes it is difficult, but we can find peace by developing tolerance and approaching life with a sense of humor. Why would you waste your valuable time getting mad at someone who is incapable of self-regulation? If you are on a team with Stew or he is disrupting your work/learning you may have to ask him to stop his behavior-but be prepared, he may continue to do it. You may need to speak to your supervisor if this happens. Do not be afraid of Stew, but do not be his best buddy either-try to keep a friendly distance and have some empathy. Try not to reinforce his behavior by laughing at inappropriate behavior, just remain detached. After all, if you realize someone cannot learn from his mistakes, you may be at a higher level of social functioning-so why not practice some gratitude about your own capabilities? Celebrate that you have some self-awareness and emotional intelligence!