

# Who gets Bullied at Work?

## The role of Emotion Stability, Psychological Flexibility, and Coping in Workplace Bullying.

Raquel Peel, Beryl Buckby, & Kerry McBain

**Introduction:** Bullying is costly for individuals and their workplaces. Considerable research has explored the incidence and prevalence of bullying in the workplace and the negative consequences to individuals and organizations<sup>1</sup>. Few studies, however, have considered the individual characteristics of adults who are bullied in the workplace<sup>2, 3</sup>.

**Methods:** This study investigated personality traits<sup>4</sup>, psychological flexibility<sup>5</sup>, and coping styles<sup>6</sup> which might contribute to victimization in workplaces including higher education. Participants were adults, between the ages of 18-65, who were currently working or had been in the workforce. Of 419 participants recruited using an online survey, 299 answered yes to being bullied as a child or in the workplace (71.6% at work and 46% as a child). The remaining 120 participants dropped out without answering, 186 participants who had experienced bullying (75% at work and 25% as a child) proceeded to complete the entire study. The final distribution consisted of 75% females and 19% males, with the majority (26.5%) between the ages of 36-45 and 70% reporting tertiary education level (i.e., over 16 years of education). Recruitment was via the James Cook University newsletter and posters, email invitations to health clinics and organizations, Facebook, and the Australian Psychological Society website. Snowballing techniques were also used.

**Results:** A standard multiple regression showed that experiencing bullying as a child ( $p=.004$ ), gender ( $p=.051$ ), age ( $p=.001$ ), and neuroticism ( $p=.017$ ) were significant predictors of bullying in the workplace ( $F_{(7,156)}=4.43, p<.05$ ), explaining 16.6% of the variance. Also, a series of standard multiple regressions found that neuroticism ( $p<.001$ ) was a significant predictor of maladaptive coping ( $F_{(7,156)}=16.99, p<.001$ ), explaining 43.3% of the variance; and psychological inflexibility in the workplace ( $F_{(7,156)}=9.01, p<.001$ ), explaining 28.8% of the variance. A hierarchical multiple regression controlling for experiencing bullying as a child, age, and gender showed that maladaptive coping ( $p=.006$ ) was also a significant contributor to bullying in the workplace ( $F_{(7,158)}=5.77, p<.05$ ), explaining 20.4% of the variance with a unique 3.9%. The majority of participants (49%) reported that being bullied at work did not prevent them from continuing to attend work. After workplace bullying, participants reported trying to resolve the matter (9.7%), making a complain (9.1%) and doing nothing (7.5%).

**Conclusion:** Neuroticism is a persistent trait in individuals who are victims of bullying. These individuals are characteristically prone to negative affect and maladaptive coping. While most researchers have attributed bullying in the workplace to absenteeism, recent studies have started to investigate how presenteeism affects the individual and organizations. Presenteeism significantly contributes to loss of productivity<sup>7</sup>. Although employees might continue to go to work while being bullied, they are unable to meet previously held standards (i.e., productivity) due to compromised mental health. The higher incidence of neuroticism (which might be expressed as paranoia) amongst participants who reported workplace bullying might also offer a cautious explanation for the dropout rates in the current study. Future directions for effective workplace programs in higher education and research should be considered.

### Key Terms

#### BULLYING

Bullying in the workplace is characterised by "repeated systematic, interpersonal abusive behaviours that negatively affect the targeted individual and the organization in which they work"<sup>8</sup>.

#### NEUROTICISM

Neuroticism is a personality trait characteristically defined by proneness to negative mood states (i.e., anxiety, angry hostility, self-consciousness) and difficulty contending with stress<sup>9,10</sup>.

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL INFLEXIBILITY

Psychological inflexibility refers to the individual's inability to adapt to their current situation, which might involve challenging events and psychological distress. Being flexible involves choosing the course of action that will deliver a healthy outcome<sup>5</sup>.

#### MALADAPTIVE COPING

Maladaptive coping refer to the individual's inability to choose healthy means to cope with stressful situations. An individual who is not coping will generally not engage in problem solving, interpreting thoughts, behaviours and feelings, seeking social support, and expressing emotions<sup>11,12</sup>.

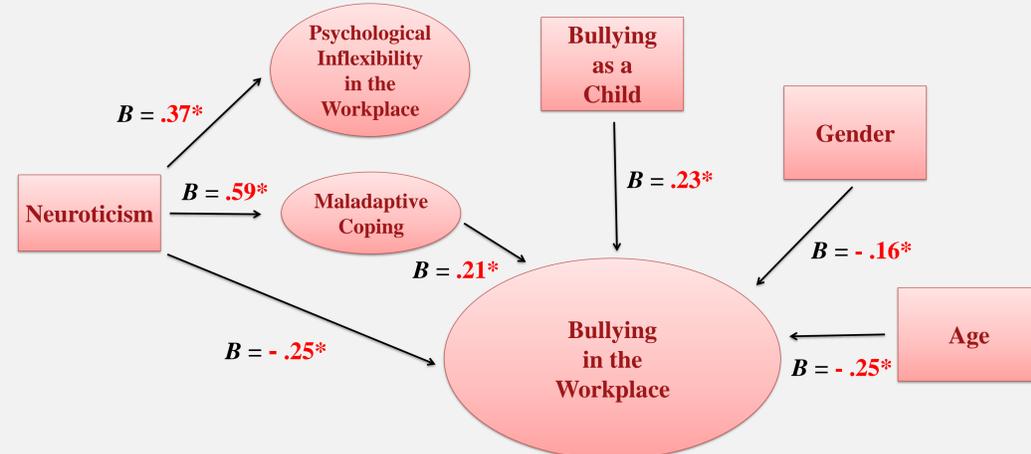
#### ABSENTEEISM & PRESENTEEISM

Absenteeism is defined as missing work because of a illness, while presenteeism is attending work when ill<sup>7</sup>.

### Participants

Age (years range)		Gender			Education		Bullying		Total
Overall Range	Mode Range	Male	Female	Not Specified	Tertiary Level	Other	Child	Workplace	
18 - 65	36 - 45 26.5%	35	139	12	70%	30%	25%	75%	186

### Results



#### What did you do about being bullied at work?

Answers	Percentage
Nothing, I just put up with it.	7.5
Made a complain.	9.1
Tried to resolve the matter.	9.7
Took stress leave.	4.3
Took stress leave and then resigned.	0.5
Got another job.	1.1
Just left.	1.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>33.3</b>

### Discussion

#### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Despite the threat to individuals' mental health and organizations, bullying continues. It is widely recognised that neuroticism is an expected (existing or consequential) characteristic of bullying victims<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, age, gender, maladaptive coping, neuroticism, and previous bullying experiences make individuals more susceptible to bullying in the workplace.

Suffering in silence and not seeking help is costly to individuals and organizations. The current study showed that the majority of employees chose to continue to go to work despite suffering repeated abuse at work. A very small percentage reported taking any action towards changing their situation. Consequently, the outcome of this statistic is a workplace populated by individuals who are predisposed to negative affect, inflexible in adapting to daily stress, and not coping with demands due to compromised mental health. Whether the individual chooses to leave or stay at work, the consequences of bullying persist through loss of productivity by individual and organisation, presenteeism and absenteeism.

#### WHERE TO NOW?

Bullying can happen in any workplace. Education of individuals about bullying might increase awareness, as will providing an effective workplace policy for managing continuing abuse and maintenance of mental health well-being after bullying. Specifically targeted education including speedy remediation guidelines are advised<sup>2,7,8</sup>. Future research to identify risk factors and risk situations for individuals and organisations is recommended.

#### TAKE HOME MESSAGE

Despite the intrinsic worry about speaking up about bullying at work, education and speedy remediation action is fundamental to prevent and stop persistent workplace abuse.

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