

# Depression, burnout, insomnia, headaches: How a toxic and sexist workplace culture can affect your health

March 30 2021, by Xi Wen (Carys) Chan and Paula Brough

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Credit: cottonbro studio from Pexels

As allegations of rape and sexual assault engulf Australian federal politics, several current and former female staffers and politicians have

come forward to share their stories of a culture of toxic masculinity within Australia's political bubble.

It's unfortunate that while [gender roles](#) are evolving at home, gender inequality and overt sexism remain prevalent in Australian political [culture](#) and in many workplaces across the country.

While the effects of a culture of toxic masculinity are most detrimental for the victims, other employees in workplaces and the wider community can also be negatively impacted.

This opens up a broader question: how does a toxic and sexist workplace culture affect the health and well-being of employees and organizations?

Keeping up the momentum for change with [@KateEllis22](#) on [@AustralianStory](#) tonight.

Former Labor MP Kate Ellis leads group of female politicians lifting lid on 'toxic workplace culture' in Parliament House <https://t.co/raf26YOVR1>

— Olivia Rousset (@oliviariusset) [March 28, 2021](#)

## What does a toxic and sexist workplace look like?

A culture of toxic masculinity is a hostile work environment that undermines women. It's also known as "[masculinity contest culture](#)", which is characterized by hyper-competition, heavy workloads, long hours, assertiveness and extreme risk-taking. It's worth noting this type of culture isn't good for men, either.

Such workplaces often feature "win or die" organizational cultures [that focus on](#) personal gain and advancement at the expense of other

employees. Many employees embedded in such a culture adopt a "mine's bigger than yours" contest for workloads, work hours and work resources.

These [masculinity contest cultures](#) are prevalent in a wide range of industries, such as medicine, finance, engineering, law, politics, sports, police, fire, corrections, military services, tech organizations and increasingly within our universities.

Microaggressions are common behaviors in workplaces steeped with a masculinity contest culture. These include getting interrupted by men in meetings or being told to dress "appropriately" in a certain way. There are also overtly dominating behaviors such as sexual harassment and violence.

These behaviors tend to keep men on top and reinforce a toxic leadership style involving abusive behaviors such as bullying or controlling others.

At a very basic level, workplaces should afford women safety and justice. But women's issues are left unaddressed in many workplaces, and many fail to provide women employees with psychological safety or the ability to speak up without being punished or humiliated.

This might be because leaders in the organization are ill-equipped to deal with these issues, feel uncomfortable bringing them up or, in some cases, are sadly not interested at all.

## **How does a toxic culture affect our health?**

Evidence suggests a toxic workplace culture can negatively affect employees' psychological, emotional and physical health.

Emotional effects [include](#) a higher likelihood of negative emotions such as anger, disappointment, disgust, fear, frustration and humiliation.

As these negative emotions build, they can [lead to](#) stress, anxiety, depression, burnout, cynicism, a lack of motivation and feelings of self-doubt.

Research also points to increased chances of physical symptoms, [such as](#) hair loss, insomnia, weight loss or gain, headaches and migraines.

Employees in toxic workplaces tend to have poorer overall well-being, and are more likely to be [withdrawn and isolated](#) at work and in their personal lives. Over time, this leads to absenteeism, and if problems aren't addressed, victims may eventually leave the organization.

For some victims who may not have advanced coping skills, a toxic culture can lead to a downward mental and physical health spiral and contribute to severe long-term mental illness. They may also engage in [displaced aggression](#), in which they bring home their negative emotions and experiences and take out their frustrations on family members.

## **How can workplaces change?**

Workplaces aiming to make a real change should start by promoting an open culture where issues can be discussed via multiple formal and informal feedback channels.

One option is formal survey mechanisms that are anonymous, so employees can be open about their concerns and feel less intimidated by the process.

A good first step is having leaders trained to address these issues.

Traditionally, workplace interventions have focused on victims themselves, putting the onus on them to do the work and come forward. However, a healthy [workplace](#) culture should see leaders actively seeking feedback to make sure any forms of toxic masculinity are stamped out.

It's a shared responsibility, and the onus shouldn't be solely on employees, but leaders, too.

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