

Leaders with low self-esteem are likely to cause 'toxic' stress at work, research shows

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There is a mountain of evidence to show that stress is a leading cause of common and lethal diseases, including heart attacks, diabetes, asthma, cancer, osteoporosis, anxiety, depression, insomnia, memory loss and

premature aging.

But how much of a role does "toxic" leadership play in workplace stress, and what are the signs of a toxic leader?

Recent data has shown that three-fifths of the world's employees say their job impacts their mental health more than anything else.

Backed up by 40 years of research, well-being expert Professor Simon L. Dolan Ph.D. says that [leaders](#) with [low self-esteem](#) are most likely to pass on stress to their teams.

"The stakes for leadership have always been high," Professor Dolan states, "but knowing you're affecting people's mental health is cause for leaders to take stock and ensure they're doing all they can to be their best and have their most positive impacts on people."

Toxic at the top

Almost every working adult will have experienced a bad boss at some point in their working career. But at what point does a bad boss become a truly toxic leader, and what can you do about it?

Professor Dolan, a respected scholar in human resources, has trawled decades of research to create "De-Stress at Work." The guide is designed to help people understand whether their manager or leader affects their [mental health](#), and what can they do to deal with it.

"Leadership can make or break an organization," Professor Dolan argues, "with good leaders motivating teams to be creative and productive. But on the other side of the coin, a bad leader can demotivate teams, cause low morale and the effect on teams can be devastating."

After extensive research, Professor Dolan suggests the main characteristics to identify a toxic leader are those who: are jealous of their team's success; are constantly concerned about competition or workplace "enemies"; often take credit for other people's work; constantly compare themselves to others; consider their self-worth to be solely driven by their latest results.

"Whether knowingly or not, a toxic leader is one who abuses their authority and violates trust to satisfy their own ego," Professor Dolan continues.

The truth about leadership

Leadership requires hard work and there can be a stereotype of leaders having almost superhuman characteristics of stamina and strength, Professor Dolan argues.

He says, "This can be really harmful, because they are required to hide their feelings even when under immense pressure. Pretending to be a superhuman causes a lot of damage to the mind and body—really the key is to be realistic about your strengths and weaknesses. A leader needs to be able to proactively manage their emotions well enough to project calm and rational to their teams."

In order to do this, they need to equip themselves with emotional regulation tools, Professor Dolan suggests.

In "De-Stress At Work," Professor Dolan offers practical solutions to tackling work-related stress both individually and on an organizational level, from best practice communication methods for companies, down to individual relaxation techniques for employees.

"However, although leaders are expected to be confident, it is important

not to confuse this with over-confidence," Professor Dolan says. "A great leader needs to be respectful, supportive and nurturing of growth—not just someone who is self-assured."

He also highlights the importance of validation—leaders who offer recognition for a job well done can provide an essential source of people's perception of psychological success and self-esteem.

Who is susceptible?

Professor Dolan argues that specific inherited characteristics, early experience in life, and, learned cognitive predispositions make individuals susceptible to the effects of stressors.

He explains, "There are many factors that contribute to a toxic personality, including a compulsive need to display their worth to others, but mainly out of a lack of deep-rooted self-esteem. This is usually a culmination of a lack of ethical and emotional development throughout their lives."

Typical reactions to stress vary depending on [personality traits](#), such as neurotic anxiety, introversion and extroversion, rigidity, flexibility, and ambition—but the main factor, according to Professor Dolan, is someone's perception of [control](#).

"Someone who feels they are in control of their lives, environments and actions [is] less stressed," Professor Dolan explains. "This is really the core of [emotional intelligence](#)."

"Even if someone is not innately confident, it is possible to change their internal perception so they feel more in control."

More information: Simon L. Dolan, De-Stress at

Work—Understanding and Combatting Chronic Stress (2023). [DOI: 10.4324/9781003217626](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003217626)

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