

# Coping with abuse in the work place

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Confronting an abusive boss is easier said than done: employees coping with the stress of abusive treatment prefer to avoid direct communication even though it would be the most effective tactic in terms of emotional well-being. This has been shown in a new study from the University of Haifa, published in the *International Journal of Stress Management* (American Psychological Association). "Abusive supervision is highly distressing for employees. Our study shows that the strategies being used by employees to cope with the stress caused by such behavior do not lead to the most positive outcomes," said Prof. Dana Yagil, who headed the study.

Earlier studies have examined the effect of abusive supervision on employee performance, but the new study set out to determine the effect of the different coping strategies on employee well-being. The study, which Prof. Yagil conducted with Prof. Hasida Ben-Zur and Inbal Tamir, of the University of Haifa's Faculty of Social Welfare and Health Sciences, examined five types of strategies used for coping with the stress factor of abusive treatment: directly communicating with the abusive supervisor to discuss the problems; using forms of ingratiation – i.e., doing favors, using flattery and compliance; seeking support from others; avoiding contact with the supervisor; and what is known as "reframing" – mentally restructuring the abuse in a way that decreases its threat.

Participating in the study were 300 employees who were asked to rate the frequency of experiencing abusive behavior by a supervisor, such as ridicule, invasion of privacy, rudeness and lying. The participants were

also asked to rate the frequency of engaging in each of 25 strategies that belong to the five categories. For example: "I tell the supervisor directly that he/she must not treat me like that" (direct communication category) ; "I support the supervisor in matters that are important to him/her, so that he/she will see I am on his/her side" (ingratiation); "I try to have the least possible contact with the supervisor (avoidance of contact); "I relieve myself by talking to other people about the supervisor's behavior" (support-seeking); and "I remind myself that there are more important matters in my life" (reframing).

The study found that abusive treatment from a superior was most strongly associated with avoiding contact – disengaging from the supervisor as much as possible and to seeking social support. Abusive supervision was least strongly associated with the strategy of direct communication. However, avoidance and seeking support resulted in the employees' experiencing negative emotions, while communication with the supervisor – which employees do less - was the strategy most strongly related to employees' positive emotions. "It is understandable that employees wish to reduce their contact with an abusive boss to a minimum," says Dr. Yagil. "However, this strategy further increases the employee's stress because it is associated with a sense of weakness and perpetuates their fear of the supervisor."

The study shows that managers should be alert to signs of employee detachment - as it might indicate that their own behavior is being considered offensive by those employees.

Provided by University of Haifa

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