

Workplace bullying a vicious circle

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Bullying at work grinds victims down and makes them an 'easy target' for further abuse according to new research from the University of East Anglia.

A study published today reveals a 'spiral' of abuse in which the [victims](#) of bullying become anxious, leaving them less able to stand up for themselves and more vulnerable to further harassment.

The research suggests that employers should not only crack down on workplace bullies, but also help victims gain the skills to cope with difficult situations.

Dr Ana Sanz Vergel, from UEA's Norwich Business School, said: "This

study shows that the relationship between workplace bullying and the psychological impact on victims is much more complex than expected.

"Examples of Bullying at work include harassing, offending, or socially excluding someone repeatedly over a period of around six months.

"Workplace bullying leads to poor health because the victim is exposed to a very [stressful situation](#) – resulting in anxiety and lack of vigour. We wanted to see whether deteriorated health could make the employee an easy target for bullying. For example, the victim may have less energy to respond to difficult situations and therefore receive less support from colleagues or supervisors.

"Another explanation is the so-called 'gloomy perception mechanism' in which anxious employees may evaluate their environment more negatively."

The research team, which included colleagues from the Complutense University and Autonomous University of Madrid in Spain, tested their theory on 348 Spanish employees. Participants were interviewed about their experiences of bullying and assessed for anxiety and vigour.

Dr Sanz Vergel said: "We found that being exposed to workplace bullying leads to deteriorated mental health and decreased well-being. But at the same time, showing anxious behaviour puts the victim in a weak position and makes them an easy target – leading to a spiral of abuse.

"We are by no means victim-blaming here. Clearly employers need to have strong policies against [workplace bullying](#). But training programmes to help victims learn coping mechanisms could help to break the vicious cycle."

More information: "Reciprocal relations between workplace bullying, anxiety and vigor: a two-wave longitudinal study." *Anxiety, Stress & Coping: An International Journal* [DOI: 10.1080/10615806.2015.1016003](https://doi.org/10.1080/10615806.2015.1016003)

Provided by University of East Anglia

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