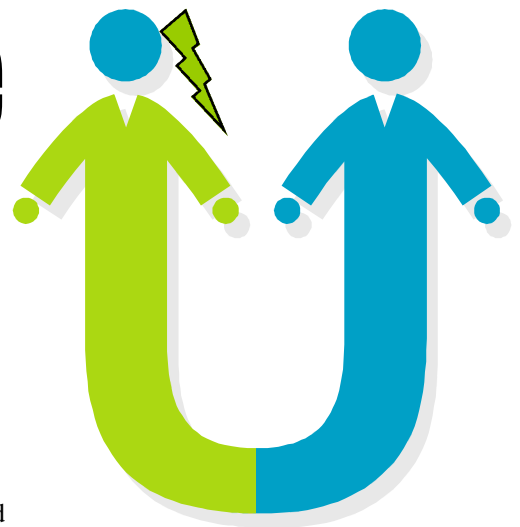


Lateral Violence

Workplace Aggression in the Shadows



Most people understand a bully to be an overbearing person who badgers and intimidates a weaker coworker.

Mean and harmful behavior toward coworkers isn't all classic bullying, however. Some behaviors in the workplace are more insidious but just as harmful.

One form of harmful aggression in the workplace that has received less attention is "lateral violence."

What Is Lateral Violence?

Lateral violence (also horizontal violence) refers to nonviolent, hostile behavior of an individual employee or group of employees against another employee or group of employees, generally on the same level at work (in a lateral position).

Lateral violence creates a damaging, dysfunctional, unhealthy work environment that affects worker productivity and retention. It's just as harmful as overt bullying, but it is believed to be more widespread.

Lateral violence is especially problematic among nursing and health care workers worldwide. Significant research and professional discussion have been dedicated to examining the problem of lateral violence in this work sector in recent years.

Not Gender-Specific

It is a myth that lateral violence is gender-specific or limited to healthcare settings. Still, the nursing profession has been credited with applying a determined focus on addressing the lateral violence at work problem.

The American Nurses Association states, "Lateral violence, also called 'horizontal violence,' refers to acts that occur between workers and has been a long-term issue for nurses for decades, when nurses inflict psychological injury on each other. Horizontal violence, also called bullying, can be covert or overt acts of verbal and non-verbal aggression causing enough

psychological distress to nurses to cause them to leave the profession (Dellasega, 2009).

"... 53% of student nurses report they had been put down by a staff nurse."

... threatening body language and strong verbal abuse reported by up to 48% of nurses, pharmacists and others.

"... 56.9% of nurses have reported being threatened or experiencing verbal abuse at work."

Examples of lateral violence are not unlike the behaviors you would find in a high school peer group. The only difference is that these behaviors take place among adults at work.

They include:

- Gossiping viciously about other employees
- Ostracizing a person or a group of persons
- Verbal abuse, such as threatening, name-calling, or belittling others
- Disrespectful gestures, such as rolling their eyes whenever a person speaks or ignoring someone speaking to them
- Nitpicking others' work
- Sarcasm
- Making inappropriate jokes or making fun of a coworker
- Withholding positive comments where appropriate or otherwise anticipated
- Nonverbal gestures and nonverbal communication that demonstrate aggression

Effects of Lateral Violence

The short-term as well as the long-term effects of horizontal violence are harmful to individuals as well as to the workplace.

Those who are victimized often experience more sick days and days with loss of productivity due to anxiety, depression, and feelings associated with burnout. In extreme cases, some employees even commit suicide.

Other problems that may arise are:

- Sleeplessness
- Emotional outbursts
- A lack of self-esteem
- Low morale
- Apathy

If You Are Experiencing Lateral Violence

If you are experiencing lateral violence at work, take steps to document each event. Lateral violence may be subtle and difficult to put into words, but use measurable language such as dates, times, and describable actions. Steer clear of intent, motive, or psychological states you think accurately describe the perpetrator (i.e., "she is jealous of me").

Avoid suffering in silence. If needed, seek the assistance of your employee assistance professional for tips on assertiveness, motivation to take action, and how to elicit support from management.

And If You're a Witness

Those who witness lateral violence need to speak up. If that's you, don't hide in the shadows. Commit to stepping in to support coworkers and call attention to inappropriate behavior. Your role as a "change agent" is an important one in stopping lateral violence.

In addition, workers can:

- Bring up the issue at staff meetings
- Request more education and training
- Ask management to develop a reporting and investigation procedure for lateral violence
- Take care of yourself on your time off, and create or find a place where you can feel safe and happy at work.
- Find healthy ways of expressing disagreements and resolving coworker conflicts.