

# Emotional abuse at work is more significant than we think, and even harder to escape

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While society has become more aware of psychological abuse in intimate or family relationships, psychological abuse in the workplace is more common and complex than we think, according to new research from NEOMA Business School, Rotterdam School of Management (RSM) at Erasmus University and Durham University Business School.

Professor Birgit Schyns from NEOMA Business School and her co-authors claim that people – perhaps unintentionally – sometimes trivialize emotional abuse in the workplace, yet it is a problem within workplaces that needs attention.

“People can greatly suffer from psychological abuse by their supervisor, with consequences ranging from increased levels of depression, emotional exhaustion and anxiety to insomnia, problem drinking, and reduced satisfaction with life,” says Schyns.

Moreover, the researchers state that given the sustained nature of the phenomenon, those exposed to an abusive supervisor often suffer over long periods of time and in many instances the effects are carried over to the next employment.

But why is emotional abuse at work so hard to tackle, and why do those on the receiving end endure it for so long?

Using a model called the ‘Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision’, the researchers looked into a hierarchically organized set of obstacles that make it difficult for followers to escape the abusive supervisor, explaining why abuse can continue over long periods of time.

They argue that there are a number of factors including barriers relating to an unsupportive societal culture, a lack of available job opportunities, and missing or unenforced legislation.

“When the economy is doing badly and the job market is tight or there are simply no jobs available in their occupational field, a practical reason for targets of abuse to stay in the relationship may be the lack of alternative options of employment,” says Schyns.

As well as this, internal factors such as an individual’s personality also determine why it is harder for some to escape an abusive work relationship.

“Some people may be less likely to leave their abusive supervisor because they value social relationships and tend to be forgiving. These people may be more likely to trust that things will change for the better and forgive their leader, rather than changing the situation they are in,” Schyns says.

Ultimately, the model created by the researchers could be used to inspire future research on the sustained nature of abusive supervision in order to provide experts with the necessary background information to help abused workers escape their supervisors.

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