

# LESSONS FROM THE BULLIED BRAIN:

How to Create Psychologically  
Safe Workplaces

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Do not despair at the start of this whitepaper. We are going to tackle the miserable subject of workplace bullying, harassment, and abuse, but that is only part of what we will address. The latter part will focus on how to transform this tiresome, outdated culture in the workplace into a speak-up, whistleblowing culture. We will focus on brain science as a way to re-invent ourselves and our experiences of work. The first part is the bad news and the latter part is the good news.

The pattern from bad to good is how I structured my 2022 book on this issue *The Bullied Brain: Heal Your Scars and Restore Your Health*. In this paper, I will give a glimpse of the science, but there is a great deal in the book that absolutely debunks the entrenched myth that ‘bullying and abuse are a necessary evil for greatness.’ World renowned neuroscientist [Dr. Michael Merzenich](#) states that [The Bullied Brain](#) is “THE most completely scientifically thorough treatment of the subject on planet earth.” We all have neuroplasticity—the capacity to change how our brains are wired—which means we can transform from a normalized bullying culture into a healthier, higher-performing speak-up culture.

The brain science is worrisome because it’s well-established that ALL forms of bullying, harassment, and abuse have the capacity to physically damage brain architecture and negatively impact brain function. The neurological scars are visible on brain scans. But the neuroscience is also empowering and inspiring because our brains are innately wired to repair and recover when we follow evidence-based practices. This whitepaper lays out the problem, but then offers inexpensive, exciting opportunities for better health, happiness, and high-performance at work. An amazing added bonus to psychological safety at work is that brains safe from bullying, harassment, and abuse improve the bottom line. We will look at this frequently misunderstood fact more closely in the latter part of the paper.

# HOW I BECAME A WHISTLEBLOWER

When I was inadvertently pulled into a bullying/abuse crisis in my workplace, I had no plan to become a whistleblower. I was simply doing my job. Despite all promises to the contrary, I realized the administrators and board—who were exposed as being negligent—would protect perpetrators, cover up their abuse, and re-victimize targets. At that point, I fulfilled my legal duty to report to my regulatory body. A year and a half later, when I received the reports—which I was told I was not allowed to share with multiple victims and their families—and saw that they were blatantly corrupt, I reported to the Ombudsman’s Office that oversees the governmental regulatory body. Three years passed and one of the victims committed suicide. I had still no report from the Ombudsman’s Office and wrote them a scathing letter. My regulatory body put me under investigation and I had to hire a lawyer to protect myself from them. There were no laws that protected me as a whistleblower. None.

In 2015, the story hit the front page of the Toronto Star, took up two full pages within the paper, and was covered on the investigative journalist program CTV’s W5. This is the textbook path of the whistleblower who suffers brutally for speaking up, is maltreated each step of the way, is seen as an enemy of the institution, rather than those doing harm. The whistleblower needs to battle the smear campaign, that is especially poisonous for victims, by widening the circle of public scrutiny when indeed the crisis is in the public interest. I believe firmly that normalized and enabled child abuse is in the public interest.

As a board member of the Whistleblowing Canada Research Society, I donate my time and expertise to advance the cause of why we all benefit from a speak up culture in Canada. I also write the “Bullied Brain” regular series for Psychology Today to share neuroscientific and neurobiological research into the impact of bullying, harassment, and abuse on brains. I also focus on evidence-based strategies to repair and recover. I believe we are at a tipping point where psychologically safe workplaces become the norm and not something for which we need to advocate. I believe we are entering into a new way of understanding the value of internal whistleblowers who strive to alert companies to worrisome conduct and thereby keep the institution and its employees far safer.

## THE BACKWARD SYSTEM

When I was pulled into this crisis, I was not prepared for the backward system that confronted me. I call the system that deals with bullying, harassment, and abuse “backward” for a number of reasons. First, it does not hold the perpetrator accountable; instead, it bends over backward to re-victimize the target(s) even when they are children. Second, it’s a system constructed on past beliefs or past training, and it assumes these beliefs are “reality.” This system—that has become “reality” for far too many—normalizes hazing from the older to the younger, or established to the new, even in highly sophisticated workplaces like law and medicine. This system glorifies obedience, compliance, serving and pleasing one’s taskmaster celebrated in films like *The Devil Wears Prada*. This system has self-justifying catch-phrases like “toughen up buttercup” or “suck it up” or “tough love” or “what doesn’t kill me makes me stronger.” This system demands “blood, sweat, and tears” and tells you that it harms you “for your own good” as exposed in the disturbing portrayal of abuse in the film *Whiplash*. Third, and most dangerous, it is a system that looks backward to outdated concepts, rather than integrates new, evidence-based insights. We are going to debunk the outdated concepts—the myths that uphold this outdated system—with science, specifically brain science.

It is this entrenched system that makes advocating for psychologically safe workplaces a battle. Can you imagine having to fight tooth and nail with lawmakers and policy-writers to protect workers with personal protective equipment? I have addressed Canadian and American lawmakers on this issue and there is a major debate on whether or not an institution needs to be responsible for employee safety when it involves psychological safety. That's like debating whether or not a company needs to ensure their construction workers wear helmets, put on steel-toed boots, and use harnesses when scaling buildings. That's like debating whether or not a company is responsible when their employees are harmed or die in a fire because the sprinkler system was faulty and hadn't been checked in years.

Can you fathom how ridiculous it would be to daily go to a job that doesn't have a fire plan or exits in case of fire and hasn't been carefully checked by professionals that the building is in fact up to code? Exposure to serious personal injury and life-threatening environments is the crux of the matter when we talk about bullying, harassment, and abuse in the workplace. If these behaviors are not acknowledged as unsafe, if they are not understood as a serious threat to health and mental health, then we are looking backward to the past. A cursory comparison of harm in the workplace by lack of or failed personal protective equipment or fire versus harm done by bullying, harassment, and abuse shows that the latter is the real danger at work for a significant majority of workers.

If we stop looking backwards and instead focus on the present, we have over twenty years of extensive, peer-reviewed, replicated science that tells us in no uncertain terms that abusive behaviors in the workplace and beyond are absolutely harmful to the body and to the brain. They threaten health and mental health in serious ways. They have the capacity to result in chronic disease, shortened lifespan, and a whole host of mental suffering in the form of anxiety, depression, panic attacks, dissociation, eating disorders, substance-abuse, and self-harm, including suicide.

## A GLIMPSE AT HOW UNSAFE WORKPLACES IMPACT THE BRAIN

The key word when it comes to bullying, harassment, and abuse is “threaten.” An unsafe brain feels threatened. Brains, like the body, need shelter and food in order to fulfill their potential, but brains also need connection, bonding, and belonging just as much, or they cannot develop properly and they cannot flourish in the workplace. If the brain worries about whether or not it is part of a community, a respected part of the team, a valued employee, then it is diverting precious resources that could be funnelled into problem-solving, productivity, creativity, innovation, and service. If the brain is afraid it might get hurt or burned, it channels its resources into being alert for danger, scanning the environment for threats, and in toxic environments can develop hypervigilance. Ironically and sadly, all of this energy is being directed toward safety because we are failing to ensure psychological safety or brain safety is a human right at work.

Bullying, harassment, and abuse have the capacity to leave “neurological scars.” Brains that are repeatedly exposed to these destructive behaviors may show an enlarged amygdala and a shrivelled hippocampus. The amygdala is involved in threat detection. It scans the environment to ensure safety. If it is repeatedly berated, put down, threatened with being excluded, ignored, humiliated, yelled at, made to feel stupid or irrelevant, publicly shamed, blocked from opportunities, and so on, it begins taking up space in the limited cortical real-estate of the brain. Survival comes first and the amygdala rightly interprets the target is at risk. Brain energy and resources are funnelled to the amygdala in unsafe workplaces. This funnelling diverts energy and resources away from the brain's ability to concentrate, learn, hone skills, produce, and connect with colleagues or clients.

In contrast, rather than becoming enlarged, the hippocampus becomes shrunken and shrivelled. Its involvement in the brain concerns memory and emotion and learning. When repeatedly exposed to the stress hormone cortisol, that is pumped into the brain and the body in toxic work environments, it loses its capacity to function properly. Once again, the targeted or exposed employee struggles to focus, remember, problem-solve, and certainly has little capacity to be creative or take intellectual risks. These are only two of many negative impacts on the brains of individuals who are bullied, harassed, or abused at work.

When we understand that a psychologically safe workplace is actually a brain safe workplace, then it becomes clear that protecting employees' brains results in healthier, happier, more high-performing workplaces. Creating environments where even whistleblowers are safe has been shown to improve the ROI as it increases profitability and productivity.

## WHEN WHISTLEBLOWERS ARE PROTECTED AND SAFE

Examining an enormous dataset for Harvard Business Review, professor at George Washington University, Dr. Kyle Welch and professor at the University of Utah, Dr. Steven Stubben wrote in 2020 that we are entering into a “golden age” of whistleblowing and it’s not because there are more crimes to report, it’s because business leaders and managers are creating environments where whistleblowers are safe, valued, and their information is properly investigated and acted upon when required. In stark contrast to workplaces where whistleblowers are retaliated against—like I was—companies that welcome internal reports about abuses have more “positive attributes” and are “more profitable and have better governance practices.” Fifteen years of anonymized data revealed that companies “with a robust whistleblower and reporting system had greater profitability and workforce productivity.” Moreover, they had fewer lawsuits and fewer whistleblower reports to regulatory agencies and other authorities.

Welch and Stubben learned that firsthand reports might seem more trustworthy than second-hand reports, but in fact the reverse is true. Noting that it seems counter-intuitive, the research revealed that a firsthand report may express a personal grievance or frustration; whereas a second-hand report tends to be more objective and takes more of the whistleblower role of communicating to the higherups that something is wrong and the institution itself could be at risk. They stress that firsthand reports are key in the investigation, but that companies suffer serious consequences by failing to invest resources into fully investigating the information of second-hand reports. The research also showed that individuals may not offer a great deal of details at first, but if they receive a trustworthy response tend to share more of what they know or suspect.

When workplace cultures make it safe for concerns, complaints, reports of abuse or fraud to be shared with leaders, the whole environment shifts because wrong-doers become the ones at risk. If abusive individuals have groomed higherups, presented themselves as the ‘pillars of the community,’ put on the façade of dedication as the textbook coverup for harmful acts, they can assume when a whistleblower reports them, it will be the whistleblower who is going to get penalized. However, in a psychologically safe workplace, that welcomes reports of wrongdoing and takes care of the whistleblower, the one doing wrong should worry about exposure and consequences. This culture shift enhances not only the health of the work community, but also, as shown in research improves the bottom line. Profitability goes hand in hand with psychological and neurological protection.

# WAYS TO REPAIR AND RECOVER THE BRAIN FROM BULLYING, HARASSMENT, AND ABUSE

The brain is innately wired to repair and recover. It is comparable to a muscle in that you can strengthen it and make it more flexible by what you practice. In [The Bullied Brain](#), I spend time in each chapter providing evidence-based practices to put in motion a program to help heal the brain if harmed, and keep it healthy and high-performing going forward. Extensive research documents that aerobic fitness not only repairs harm done to the brain from the toxic stress of bullying, harassment, and abuse, but it also renders the brain more resilient going forward. I devote a whole chapter to this research. Likewise, exercising your empathy circuit—your capacity to see the world through someone else’s lens and ‘walk in their shoes’—has great health benefits for the brain and for connecting with others. A full chapter is dedicated to empathy development and another to mindfulness.

Of course mindfulness is an Eastern practice thousands of years old, but contemporary neuroscientific research has shown it’s exceptional for reducing stress, recovering from stress, and building healthy brain integration and connectivity. The key to remember from a brain point of view is that “what fires together wires together” and “what the brain does a lot of, the brain gets good at.” If we want healthy, empathic, high-performing cultures at work then we need to put time into firing up neural networks for community, for care, and for safety. We need to repeatedly ensure that we create courageous speak-up cultures where whistleblowers can report wrongdoing internally and find themselves supported and positive action taken.

When we want to learn a language or a new skill in technology or accounting, we put in deliberate practice because we know that the “brain learns by repetition at timed intervals.” If we want safe, healthy, high-performing workplaces then it is going to require deliberate practice especially if we need to rewire and relearn outdated practices that science has shown to be unhealthy and unproductive. Spending time strengthening the brain in an online, gamified “[brain gym](#)” designed by neuroscientists is another excellent way to establish brain-fitness especially if you have suffered bullying, harassment, or abuse. One final note: the brain learns by making mistakes. We need to celebrate the effort and cultivate what Dr. Angela Duckworth terms a “growth-mindset” if indeed we want to make psychologically and neurologically safe workplaces the norm.