

## Witnesses to bullying more likely to leave than targets: Study

BY SARAH DOBSON

**WHILE VICTIMS OF** workplace bullying have a tough time of it, employees who witness the bullying may actually be more likely to leave the workplace because of the unhealthy behaviour, according to a study from the University of British Columbia (UBC).

When someone is not bullied directly, the impact of bullying within the work unit has a stronger impact on him than when he is also the direct target of bullying, according to the study, which analyzed data involving 357 nurses at 41 hospital units in Western Canada.

Simply working in an aggressive environment can lead to turnover intentions because bullying represents “a severe moral transgression that creates an abstract sense of moral uneasiness,” it said.

As a result, those who are aware of bullying can be moved to quit out of disgust or as a protest.

“Witnessing others being bullied already evokes a sense of moral indignation, but the added discrepancy between one’s own good treatment and others’ poor treatment makes it seem even more unfair,” said *Escaping Bullying: The Simultaneous Impact of Individual and Unit-Level Bullying on Turnover Intentions*.

The departure is more about self-protection, said Sandra Robinson, a professor of organizational behaviour and human resources at the Sauder School of Business at UBC in Vancouver and co-author of the study.

“We want to withdraw when we have these experiences and we witness this going on, whether in the workplace or communities we live in or so forth,” she said. “We don’t want to be party to it, even indirectly, that sort of environment that would enable that kind of behaviour to happen.”

Often being a witness to bullying is very subtle, so it’s heard second-hand or people pick up vibes, said Robinson.

“There’s a lot of things that can tell you

it’s going on but not necessarily so much that you are in a position to call it out or respond to it either,” she said. “It’s not a case of people standing there like an audience... it’s more ambient than that.”

And it’s possible turnover intentions are lower for the targets because they feel too helpless to leave, said Robinson.

“The same reason they might be targeted might be the same reason that they’re not able to change their situation or why they may not be exiting. It could also be a sense of learned helplessness, in the sense if it’s going on for awhile, they may feel less able to deal with the situation — these things are so complicated.”

### Fairness, justice expected

The study’s results ring true because there is an orientation to fairness and justice and other kinds of principles we have come to expect of workplaces that aren’t always there, according to Judith MacIntosh, a professor in the faculty of nursing at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton who has done research on workplace bullying.

When that happens, people tend to feel badly or guilty because they aren’t getting the same treatment and aren’t able to stop the treatment.

“That may be partly because they are not sure how to do that but also there’s a sense of fear in some bystanders that they may draw the same bullying if they begin to intervene or try to support the target,” said MacIntosh. “There are a lot of interesting dynamics.”

It’s not surprising because people have a strong sense of what is just, said Sharon Bar-David, president of Bar-David Consulting in Toronto, which provides solutions for creating respectful work environments.

“And if you’re not inside a situation, you often are able to more objectively measure what’s fair and not,” she said. “When you violate people’s sense of justice, they will react because they need to equalize that ledger and an intent to leave is a way of equalizing the justice ledger in one’s mind.”

Bystanders who see others being dealt with unjustly may not step up to the plate to defend or intervene, so they experience a strong sense of guilt, said Bar-David.

“A way to get out of that dilemma is to say, ‘OK, at least I’m going to leave,’ and that way it’s a resolution to their own sense of guilt and shame.”

### More than 2 people

Many of the people involved in MacIntosh’s studies have discussed the impact a bullying environment has on their own experiences, and how they left that workplace or had planned to leave.

“Workplace bullying isn’t an interpersonal problem between the target and the person bullying, it’s a work unit-level problem and needs to be addressed at that level,” said MacIntosh.

Research is shedding more light on the bystander experience and how that can cost businesses money when it comes to indicators such as low engagement and turnover, said Bar-David.

“Employers, by and large, are quite blind to the whole bystander phenomena and to the effect of bullying on work units as a whole.”

But studies have shown there is a social contagion effect, so it’s important to deal with problem behaviour early on, before it spreads, said Robinson.

“You could have a turnover problem but it may not be due to things that are specifically happening to individuals. They might be witnessing or be aware of other stuff going on in the environment... other types of behaviour,” she said. “So, management probably in general isn’t as sensitive to it as it should be. Everybody’s watching in a way, everybody’s impacted.”

### Management challenges

Often the problem is exasperated by poorly equipped management, union representatives or HR, said MacIntosh.

“Sometimes the work environment is as much at fault as the person doing the bul-

lying because sometimes a manager isn't managing the bullying or the people who are doing it, and neither are HR people because people often don't know exactly what to do, so the environments often get out of hand," she said.

The dynamic between the bully and victim is not the whole story and the work unit is very important in managing the problem,

said MacIntosh.

"If we can craft our interventions to deal with the work unit at that level and the dynamics in the work unit, we will be able to support managers," she said.

"But, as long as we still focus on it as an individual or an interpersonal problem, we're not going to resolve it."

Employers have a lot of problems misdi-

agnosing bullying, said Bar-David, citing a recent conference that mentioned HR is perceived as very inadequate in dealing with bullying complaints and issues, let alone bystanders.

"HR professionals would do a good service to themselves by getting much more informed about this direct bullying and ambient bullying."