

IS YOUR BOSS MAKING YOUR JOB A LIVING

HELL?

One in three of you are being bullied at work, and experts believe the credit crunch has made things worse. That's why *Company* has teamed up with trade union UNISON to raise awareness of workplace bullying and to encourage you to stand up to the workplace bully...

Sitting in the toilet cubicle, tears streaming down her face, Karen* tries to minimise mascara damage for the fifth consecutive day this week. Pulling herself together, she puts on a brave face and heads back to her desk. A hush falls as she walks past and her colleagues stop talking and pointedly stare at their screens.

Karen, a 27-year-old admin executive from the Midlands, has stayed late into the night every day this week. She'll be busy working through the weekend, too, yet her boss refuses to acknowledge how hard she's working. Instead, an email pings into her inbox giving her more unrealistic deadlines and piling on more pressure. In just three months, Karen's lost two stone in weight from stress, her relationship with her fiancé is suffering and her confidence is at an all-time low. That's what happens when you're feeling the strain of a workplace bully.

Karen's story will sound horribly familiar to thousands of young career-women across the country. In fact, a third of young women say they've experienced the sting of an office bully, and experts claim the recession is partly to blame. Rising redundancies and widespread unemployment have heaped pressure on twentysomething women so desperate to hang on to their jobs that they're willing to put up with extreme behaviour from their bosses. Like Maria*, 26, who told us about the boss who hit her with a ruler when she made mistakes, or Jayne*, 27, the admin assistant who had folders thrown at her when her boss got angry. Then there's Alison*, the IT assistant threatened with losing her job when she phoned in sick.

It seems the credit crunch has fuelled a secret office bullying epidemic, with thousands of young women too scared to speak up for fear of losing their jobs and not being able to find new ones. And, with no official legislation to protect women suffering at the hands of a workplace bully, it's a no-win situation for many. Something needed to be done, so *Company* has decided to team up with the UK's biggest public-sector trade union, UNISON, to highlight the issue.

Back in the summer, we ran a survey to find out just how widespread bullying at work really was, and we were shocked by the results. One in three young women are currently being bullied at work and, of those who aren't being bullied now, 41% have been at some point in their career.

Most common bullying includes excessive work-monitoring and criticism, isolation or exclusion, intimidation, unrealistic targets, public humiliation, insulting jokes and spreading malicious rumours. It's no wonder, then, that a whopping three-quarters of those being bullied say it has affected their physical and mental health. A further two-thirds have suffered depression as a direct result of bullying and over half have suffered from insomnia. Just over a third say it has kept them away from work, with one in ten taking between 41 to 100 days off 'sick'. But surely no job is worth risking your health

for. "Workplace bullying is a widespread problem," says Hope Daley, Head of Health and Safety at UNISON. "But most companies don't have an enforced anti-bullying policy in place. Victims need to be supported and encouraged to report incidents, to show that bullying will not be tolerated."

ARE YOU BEING BULLIED?

A certain amount of stress is to be expected in any job, but how do you know when a colleague or boss's behaviour crosses into the realms of bullying? When do deadlines become discrimination and where do you draw the line between a firm boss and an unfair one? "Some bullies use obvious methods, like degrading comments and public humiliation," says Hope. "But there are other, more subtle ways you can be bullied. For example, withholding information needed to get the job done and constantly excluding someone from work-related events."

For Emma*, 27, a revenues officer from Cornwall, it was the unrealistic workload she was given over her colleagues that made her feel she was being bullied. "My workload literally doubled overnight," she explains. "I understand that, in a recession, everyone's workload might be increased but, in my case, it was impossible to do the work of two people."

Dealing with a huge workload was stressful enough, but even tougher was the fact that Emma also had to deal with the reaction of her co-workers. "I don't know whether they were jealous that I had more responsibility or whether they'd never really liked me, but I started hearing that my colleagues were talking about me and saying I was unable to do the job."

Emma tried to ignore it but, before long, her colleagues had started making bitchy comments to her face. "Once I asked them for directions and they told me to step in front of a bus.

41%
of you have been bullied at some point in your career

It might have been a joke but, when that sort of thing is happening all day long, it can really get you down. I tried to go to my line manager, but he said he couldn't see what the problem was."

In the end, Emma was signed off sick with depression and didn't return to work for three months. And, even though she's back now, she's taking anti-depressants and sleeping tablets to cope with her office bullies. "It's really affected my confidence," she admits. "I've tried looking for another job but there isn't much out there. For the time being, I feel like I've just got to put up with it."

SUFFERING IN SILENCE

Emma isn't alone in trying to ignore the bullies. According to our survey, there are a number of reasons young women decide to keep quiet; 19% were worried colleagues would react negatively, 23% were worried that speaking up would make things worse, 23% were worried they'd be called a troublemaker, over one in ten were scared they'd lose their job, and a fifth was worried they were being over-sensitive.

Karen wishes she'd spoken out before the workplace bullying she was experiencing got so bad that she had to >



Does the bleep of your Blackberry fill you with fear of another email from the boss?

'I realised I was being singled out. Every minute in the office was torture'

take time off sick. She'd been happy in her role for three years before her new line manager joined. Right from the start, her new boss set Karen an excessive workload, but it was the constant exclusion from social events and conversations with other colleagues that really upset her. "For some reason, she took a dislike to me," explains Karen. "At first, I thought I was being paranoid but, after three months of constant bitchy comments and snide remarks, I realised I was being singled out. It got to the stage that every minute in the office became torture. When I got home, I'd be so wound up and upset, I'd take my frustration out on my fiancé. I was so stressed that my weight dropped to seven stone. I went from bubbly and carefree to this nervous, weak person who cried all the time."

Karen says the crunch came when the pressure drove her to punch a hole in her bedroom wall. "The next day, I went to the doctor and he signed me off with stress and anxiety for three months. Things were so bad I was too scared to leave the house for the first four weeks." When Karen returned to

work, she lodged a complaint about her line manager and has now been moved to a different office. "I still feel angry that I had to move and she was allowed to continue bullying people but, now I'm working in a different office, I can see how

a happy workplace is meant to feel. I don't dread going to work any more. I just wish I'd spoken up about it sooner."

BEAT THE BULLIES...

When the thought of going to work fills you with dread, it's understandable to want to hide under your duvet. But there must be something else victims of workplace bullying can do?

"It's important to keep a record of every instance where you feel you've been bullied," advises Hope. "Then you can give a clear portrayal of what you've been going through." Most workplaces should have a safety rep or union stewards you can report the situation to but, if your company doesn't, your line manager should handle the problem. "Put everything in writing, so you have evidence," continues Hope. "If you're having a meeting to discuss the problem, take a colleague along for support. Being bullied can be scary and distressing, but it's important to realise there are people to support you. It might seem frightening, but we want to encourage young women to speak up and not suffer in silence."

In the meantime, *Company* and UNISON would like the Government to sit up and take notice of bullying in

the workplace. We want to revise the current Dignity In The Workplace Bill to incorporate more rigid guidelines on bullying and the kind of behaviour you are entitled to expect when you're at work. We believe every HR department should be fully trained on acceptable working conditions, and all workplaces should have access to counsellors, who offer support and advice, should you need it. Because, whatever your job title, everyone is entitled to be treated with respect in the workplace.

Karen has just got back from her honeymoon. She's still overwhelmed at how great it feels to be working in a friendly atmosphere, but now she knows that's the least she should expect. "What's happened has made me stronger," she says. "If I'm ever bullied at work again, I'll know to speak up and tackle the situation head-on. I'm so glad *Company* is raising awareness on this issue, because it might stop other young women going through what I did. No one should fear going to work. At least I know that now."

● For more information on UNISON, check their website at www.unison.co.uk, or call 0845 355 0845

74%
of those bullied say it affects their mental and physical health



'I STOOD UP TO A BULLY AND WON'

Jessica, 27, an accounts manager from London, refused to let her workplace bully drive her out of the job she loved

"When I was 21, I landed a job in the accounts department of a big hospital. The job was exciting and I loved my colleagues. But, two years in, my supervisor left and we got a new boss. She took a dislike to me and any minor issue was turned into a drama. Once, when I was ill and called in sick, I tried phoning her three times between 8am and 10am to say I wouldn't be in but couldn't get through, so eventually I spoke to her manager. When I returned to work, she tried to take disciplinary action because I hadn't spoken to her directly. Soon I was expected to report to her every time I left my desk, even to use the toilet. And, when I asked to book annual leave, she'd wait until the last minute to approve it so I couldn't plan my holiday. I felt helpless. My stomach turned at the thought of seeing her and I couldn't believe how fast my dream job had turned into a nightmare.

I decided to complain to my senior managers, although I was worried about causing a fuss or making the situation worse. Unfortunately, the managers said my boss and I should resolve our issues together. I felt the only option was to look for a new job, but I wouldn't be pushed out.

I wrote a formal complaint to my department head and we had meetings with various managers. I presented evidence in the form of emails, dates and times when I felt my boss's behaviour had been inappropriate. We were sent to mediation, where we had to discuss our issues and figure out a way to work together. We agreed to compromise on certain things – for instance, I was able to leave my desk for up to 15 minutes at a time without telling her. And, gradually, we built a working relationship.

Looking back, I'm glad I tackled the situation. Now I'm a manager, too, and I'll never allow my staff to be treated that way. I decided to help others stand up for their rights and became a representative for Unison. Now I'm proud to help girls in the same position. I want to make the workplace a good environment – we're all entitled to that." ■