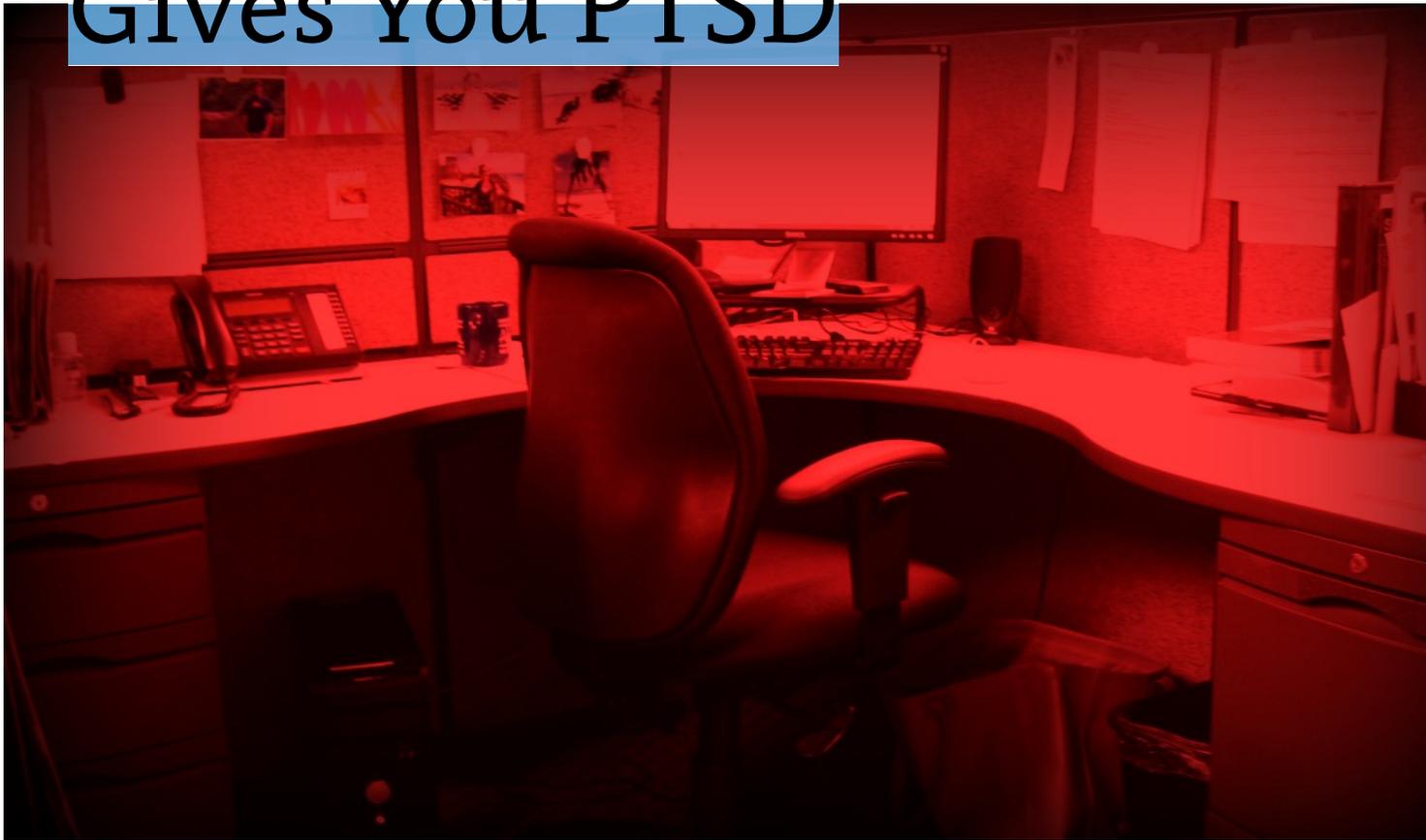


# When Your Workplace Gives You PTSD



REAL LIFE HORRIBLE BOSSES

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BY CARRIE ANTON

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Tucked away in my mouse-colored cube, I abandoned good desk posture recommendations and sunk low into my theoretically ergonomically correct chair. My goal was to make myself as small as possible so as not to garner the attention of my director, whose office door had just opened. Past experience enabled me to decode her footstep pattern as if I were a military operative receiving Morse code signals: her short, quick-paced steps with a hard-heel strike told me she was on the warpath—and I certainly didn't want to be public enemy number one.

Too anxious to type, I placed my hands on my keyboard and stared stiffly at my screen, willing myself to work but not capable of thinking beyond the inevitable fury that was about to be unleashed. While I hated for anyone on my team to experience my director's doomsday, I couldn't help but hope that I wasn't the one in her crosshairs.

When she stopped short at the first desk in my aisle, I knew I was safe. I breathed a quick sigh of relief, despite being aware that I was being offered only a temporary reprieve; this scene would likely play out again soon, possibly multiple times before the workday was over.

**“I was not capable of thinking beyond the inevitable fury that was about to be unleashed.”**



The poor soul incurring her current wrath was Jonathan\*, a favorite whipping boy of the director. Jonathan was a mild-tempered man who wore his emotions on his sleeve—or more accurately, as tears streaming down his face.

I often mirrored his response during my own morning commute, which on countless occasions also included stops along the way to allow for dry heaving out the door of my car. Similarly, my drives home were often soundtracked with loud, angry “grrl” metal music and lots of screaming. Once home, typically way past dinnertime and still saddled with more work than the limited evening hours would allow me to complete, I would finally fall asleep with the aid of a few alcoholic beverages.

It was a dark time in my life. I was sad, frazzled, worried, and had very little self-worth.

This is no huge surprise, really, as any closed-door session with my director was laden with intense shaming, blaming, and questions like, “So, when do you think you're going to get better at your job?” To this day, a sense of dread precedes any interaction with an authority figure.

With a family history of depression, I began to see a therapist, chalking up my emotionally turbulent reactions to my boss as a combination of my off-kilter brain chemistry and being in my early 20s, relatively new to the corporate scene. In hindsight, I now question if it was post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

While PTSD is often linked with veterans who've experienced military combat, [sexual assault survivors](#), or catastrophic events, newsworthy-level trauma [doesn't hold exclusive rights to PTSD](#) causes.

## [How Work Environments Can Be Triggering](#)

“If you think about trauma as a physical image, it's a wound—a threat to the well-being of the organism,” says Dr. Paul White, a licensed psychologist who consults on workplace relationships and co-authored [Rising Above a Toxic Workplace](#). “It's significant. And it can happen over time, with multiple events that add up, or from a singular event.”

[“If you think about trauma as a physical image, it's a wound.”](#) 

“It can be classified as emotional abuse,” adds Dr. L. Michael Tompkins, a clinical psychologist with expertise in PTSD and founder of [Straight Ahead Management](#). “Bad bosses can be guilty of months or years of berating, overworking, withholding information, threatening, and not appreciating one's work, which can definitely cause PTSD-like symptoms, if not an actual diagnosis.”

PTSD symptoms include (but aren't limited to) depression, anxiety, social isolation, guilt, lack of pleasure, hyper-vigilance, hyper-arousal, sleep interruption, flashbacks, and nightmares. All of which I could relate to, despite the absence of a clinical diagnosis and despite having a job writing and editing words rather than saving lives or protecting our country.

Bottom line, trauma is trauma, no matter how big or small or where it occurs.

It's important to note that nearly everyone develops some level of post-traumatic stress reaction after exposed to severe stressors, according to a [2013 report](#) published in the journal *Occupational Medicine*. However, the report notes, “most stress reactions will diminish within days, weeks, or a few months without any intervention. In a significant proportion of those exposed to severe stressors, the outcome is increased resilience, acceptance, and post-traumatic growth.”

I'd love to think my experience made me into a better employee and stronger writer, but given the option, I definitely would've opted for on-the-job training or continuing education in my field rather than falling prey to a bully. And a bully is exactly what my director was. "Bullying is psychological violence," says Dr. Lynne Curry, author of *Beating the Workplace Bully*, president of the management consulting firm, [The Growth Company, Inc.](#), and founder of the [Workplace Coach](#) and [Bully Whisperer](#) blogs. "Although some individuals occasionally bully, a bully intentionally and repeatedly humiliates and intimidates."

Curry says the most common form of bullying is verbal, including ridiculing, insulting, slandering, or making the target the butt of mean jokes and abusive, offensive remarks. But it can also be physical, involving pushing, shoving, assaulting, or making obscene gestures, or even situational, such as sabotage or deliberate interference or humiliation.

**"Bullying is psychological violence."**



No matter what tactic the bully employs, the end result is likely a toxic workplace, which White explains is the result of one or more of three major components: a sick system, wherein the structure of the workplace organization isn't healthy, due to little to no communication, a lack of good decision making, and accountability; a toxic leader, who is generally not just incompetent at leading employees, but someone who is narcissistic, manipulative, condescending, and inauthentic, and steals the credit of others; dysfunctional colleagues, people who tend to have chronic problems with drug and alcohol abuse, anger management, finances, lying, holding jobs, and/or long-term relationships. (Such employees are, however, excellent at dodging responsibility, blaming, making excuses, and creating conflicts between other people as a smokescreen for themselves.)

## **How To Deal When Your Work Life Is Toxic**

Repeated exposure to a workplace bully or toxic job environment is stressful, and should be addressed quickly, when possible. "A target experiencing bullying is initially highly motivated to figure out what's happening," says Curry. "Long-term, high-intensity



**THE DANGERS OF DATING  
FAUX-FEMINIST MEN**



**CAN BIRACIAL ACTIVISTS  
SPEAK TO BLACK ISSUES?**

bullying gives the target an overwhelming feeling of danger, leading to the chronic state of anxiety and cognitive confusion, a characteristic of PTSD.”

Within your professional setting, Human Resources and other trusted organizational leaders can be good resources to help respond to an unhealthy workplace situation. It's easy to feel powerless, especially if the trauma stems from someone higher up in the food chain, but action is better than inaction.

To avoid becoming the victim, Curry says to beware of the classic of traps of living in denial, isolating yourself, getting angry and losing your temper, and stooping to the level of others. “If you're targeted, preventing yourself from the slow or fast decline into feeling completely powerless starts with you,” she says. “Be willing to exit your comfort zone and deal directly with the bully. Learn to turn the tables on the bully by direct statements of ‘that’s not going to work on me’ and with questions, thus taking control of the confrontation by forcing the bully to answer your question, rather than your responding to his or her volley.”

**“PTSD is not an intellectual disorder.”**



Having been there, done that, I admit to feeling outmatched by my director. Not only did she outrank me, but she also had decades of experience in the working world that left me feeling like a newb. Still, I made a concerted effort of documenting the troublesome events as best possible, finding strength in numbers by banding together with other coworkers, and talking to my HR group and a higher executive when matters got of hand. I'd like to say my “squeaky-wheel” activities made a significant change, but in the end, leaving my job was the only real solution.

I thought it would be smooth sailing once I escaped, but it turns out trauma can have long-lasting effects.

“PTSD is not an intellectual disorder,” says Thompson.

“Its imprint is on the subconscious mind, which is evidenced by trigger mechanisms such as seeing someone in the mall who looks like your bad boss which causes you a panic attack. The way to treat trauma is not through intellectualism or dialogue or cognitive behavioral therapy. Only when the autonomic nervous system is relaxed and not in the fight or flight mode can one begin to attend to the trauma.”



**HOW PSEUDO-ALLIES  
ENABLE THE KILLING OF  
BLACK BODIES**



**IN WHITEWASHING THE  
PULSE SHOOTING WE**

**DEHUMANIZE THE VICTIMS**



**ROXANE GAY, I'M SORRY I  
WASN'T LISTENING**



**WHAT MY KIDNEY STONE  
TAUGHT ME ABOUT SEXISM  
IN THE ER**

A [2015 study](#) published in an Italian medical journal found victims of workplace bullying requiring “early and continuous psychological support in order to promote their psychological well-being and work reinstatement.” Already enrolled in therapy before leaving my job, I was well on my way with the type of trauma treatment Tompkins says is necessary: “compassion from others, deep breathing, relaxation, meditation, movement (exercise, walking), touch (hugging).”

Years and other jobs have passed since those dark days of working for that director, and I’m happy to say it’s finally all behind me. She was definitely the benchmark by which I judged all future management, keeping a close eye on warning signs whenever possible. My current boss now is a dream, offering flexible hours, a comfortable environment, yoga pants work attire, and a bulldog for an office mate. Then again, I work for myself.

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*\*Name has been changed*

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RAPE, ALTON STERLING,  
AND THE COMPLEXITY OF  
JUSTICE



DANGEROUS



**CARRIE ANTON**

Carrie is a freelance writer and editor living in Madison, WI. Health and fitness are two of her favorite topics to cover, but she admits that her lazy English bulldog is her true passion. She’s been published in Women’s Health, Oxygen, Fitness Rx for Women, and other national publications. She contributes regularly to TheKnot.com, Reebok’s blog, WiBride.com, and SlendHer.com. If she had the time, she’d nap twice a day.



# Stop Treating Emotions Like Character Flaws Of The Powerless

SARAH BRONSON

We all have emotions, but only some are seen as problems.

ALL THE FE