Forced to leave my job

Mary's story traces the downward spiral of confidence in the face of a supervisor's bullying

Although Mary was bullied by her boss several years ago and has since left her job, her name and some of the details of her story have been changed because she still fears reprisals for speaking out.

The bullying began when Mary returned from maternity leave. A new supervisor had been appointed in her absence and Mary was keen to get to know her. 'She would arrange a meeting with me and then cancel it just minutes beforehand. I lost track of the number of times she did this,' Mary explains.

When the two women finally got together several weeks later, the meeting only added to her feelings of discomfort and unease. 'She spent a lot of time telling me about previous places she'd worked and how she'd had to downgrade staff. She then kept reminding me that I needed to make sure I knew the ins-and-outs of different policies and where I could put my hands on written copies at a moment's notice, if she should ask to see them. On the surface it was friendly enough, but afterwards I felt threatened and upset.'

'I'm not picking on you but...'

Soon Mary was being called to see her manager almost daily, where derogatory remarks would be made about her hairstyle, what she was wearing and her jewellery. 'Every sentence would start with, "I'm not picking on you but..." Other staff would be wearing something similar, but she didn't seem to notice. There was no rationale behind what she did.'

Matters finally reached a head when a patient made a verbal complaint about the ward where Mary was working. Although it was discovered that the patient had a history of making false accusations, the complaint was never formally logged in writing and was eventually withdrawn, Mary felt that it gave her supervisor the perfect opportunity to increase the harassment.

The situation dragged on for weeks and I became frightened,' Mary recalls. 'At one point she told me that if I didn't produce written policies within the next two days, she would take disciplinary action against me – but the policies didn't actually exist. At that point I just wanted to walk away. If she'd physically assaulted me I could have gone to the police, but this was a mental assault.'

Having never taken any sick leave during her ten-year nursing career, Mary was finally persuaded by her worried friends and family that she should seek an appointment with her doctor, who immediately recognised that she was suffering from stress and told her she must take several weeks off. Yet even throughout her sick leave, Mary received phone calls and letters about the patient's complaint, some saying that it had now been sorted out and others asking for yet more information. 'I became too afraid to answer the phone. It was a nightmare,' says Mary.

When she returned, she was immediately called to a meeting where she was made to relive the entire episode – despite the fact that the allegations had been withdrawn. Mary says: 'Finally it dawned on me that it had just been used as an excuse.'

On another manager's advice, Mary took special leave for several months and finally returned to work in a less senior role, working a reduced number of hours.

'It was degrading and humiliating,' she says. But what was worse was that, in her absence, many of her former colleagues had become demoralised and decided to leave. 'I'd been proud of my job and what we'd managed to achieve. When I went back, I was ashamed of the unit. It had been destroyed.'

At that point Mary began to look for another job, but her confidence was so low she could not contemplate a future in nursing. 'I felt worthless,' she remembers. Almost at her lowest point, she spotted an advert for a local theatre which was auditioning for actors to appear in a new stage production. 'Although I'd never done anything like it before and didn't expect to get anywhere, I got the part.' A few months of treading the boards inspired her to embark on a theatre studies course at her local college.

Turn around

Today she writes and performs some of her own work and has just taken a job with a company that tries to tackle the issue of bullying in the workplace. She will perform and run workshops based on a script she has produced, believing that the role will give her the chance to combine her nursing and drama skills with her own experiences to prevent others having to endure what happened to her. 'Although I'm doing something now that I would have never considered doing and things have turned around for me, no one should ever be subjected to the kind of experience I had. It never leaves you,' she says.

But her greatest sadness is that the people who benefited most from the nursing care she and her colleagues provided are ultimately the ones who are most adversely affected. Mary says: 'We offered a really good, highly respected service and that's gone now. The patients have paid the highest price.'

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