

# Virginia Quarterly Review Tragedy Highlights Workplace Bullying

It is a common and unfortunate reality that many working people complain about being mistreated by a coworker or boss at one point or another in their careers. For many, this mistreatment is most likely an isolated incident or the result of a misunderstanding, but for some, it may be part of the phenomenon of workplace bullying. This repeated mistreatment, which can include verbal abuse, offensive conduct or work interference, could cause or worsen an employee's mental health condition, like depression. In some cases, the employee may have a workers' compensation claim.

In one tragic case, there has been speculation that workplace bullying may have contributed to a Virginia Quarterly Review employee's suicide.

## **Suicide of VQR Employee**

Earlier this year, the managing editor of the Virginia Quarterly Review (VQR) literary journal killed himself near the University of Virginia's campus where he worked. After the initial shock of Kevin Morrissey's death, his family, friends and local and national media began to point to a bout of workplace bullying that immediately preceded his suicide as a possible cause. Morrissey's wife, Maria, made one strong statement that if Morrissey's boss, Ted Genoways, had not bullied him, he would still be alive. Maria also admitted, however, that Morrissey suffered from clinical depression. So, even if the workplace bullying did not cause Morrissey's depression, could it have exacerbated his depression and pushed him over the edge?

Workplace Bullying Survey

According to a 2010 survey by the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI), a nonprofit organization that educates the public about workplace bullying, 35 percent of more than 53 million U.S. employees report experiencing bullying at work. Around 15 percent of workers witness this type of bullying. The remaining 50 percent deny ever encountering workplace bullying, so the WBI has labeled this the “silent epidemic.” While many bullies are men and most targets are women, the WBI survey indicates that workplace bullying typically takes the form of same-gender harassment. Based on these findings, bullying is four times more common than other forms of harassment, but the law does not protect bullied employees.

### **Workers’ Compensation an Option?**

When it comes to legal remedies for workplace bullying, there are only limited options currently available. If the bullying includes sexual harassment or age or gender discrimination, an employment law attorney can pursue a claim. So, without these elements or proof of a hostile work environment, the pain and suffering an employee experiences at the hand of an abusive coworker or boss could go unchecked. However, if the bullying worsens an employee’s mental illness or mental injury, or causes one to develop, filing a workers’ compensation claim may be an option. These work-related mental disabilities can include anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression.

### **Help for Bullied Employees**

While the investigation into whether workplace bullying might have caused Kevin Morrissey to commit suicide is still underway, his death highlights the effect that workplace bullying can have on bullied employees. It is a reality check, hopefully for both employers and employees alike, that bullying may exacerbate or cause workers to suffer conditions that need medical care, before employees injure or kill themselves or others. If you have experienced a hostile

environment at work, you think you may be the victim of a workplace bully and you have been diagnosed with a condition like anxiety or depression, contact a local workers' compensation lawyer to discuss your rights and options for recovery.