
FINDING PEACE AT WORK

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A Mindful Guide from a Devoted Employee Rights Attorney

FREE CHAPTER

Chapter 1: Veiled Conflict: Acknowledging Workplace Hostility

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Begin by naming what is happening.

If work has begun changing how you feel, think, sleep, or live outside the office, the first victory is recognizing it. You do not need to have every feeling figured out before you begin.

Read this chapter slowly. Pause when you need to. When you reach the journaling prompts, I encourage you to stop, take out paper, and answer honestly. The goal is not to judge yourself. It is to see clearly enough to choose what comes next.

— Shaun

Veiled Conflict: Acknowledging Workplace Hostility

Andrea was a bright, dedicated worker who thought she had landed her dream federal job. But as weeks turned into months, she felt a growing sense of dread each morning. Her once bright enthusiasm faded. The cause? Subtle, persistent undermining by her manager, constant criticism, dismissal of her ideas, and a sense of exclusion that gnawed at her self-confidence. Andrea was trapped in the insidious reality of workplace hostility.

In her early days at the job, Andrea was full of energy and optimism. She believed this role was the perfect fit for her skills and ambitions. However, it did not take long for her to notice a pattern. Her manager, Ms. Benson, white, seemed to single her out. Andrea, black, was often given tasks far below her skill level while her colleagues were assigned more challenging projects. The subtle digs and dismissals from Ms. Benson began to wear on her. Andrea's assertiveness, a quality that had always been praised in her previous roles, was now being misinterpreted as aggressiveness.

Andrea's experience highlights how workplace hostility can stem from various sources, not just discrimination. Sometimes, it is about personality clashes, challenging people, or simply bad bosses. These situations can be just as damaging as those rooted in discrimination. The key is recognizing when a stressful environment crosses the line into hostility. At the end of the day, the cause might not matter as much to emotions, but empowering yourself to think about the cause, and explore it, while exploring your feelings will help release them properly. To fight something, you need to be able to look at and have some understanding about it. Most people at first merely avoid it because it is too painful to think about. But we should start to think about it.

The truth is hostility at work can manifest in numerous ways. It might be a colleague's constant snide remarks, aimed to belittle and overshadow your achievements. It could be a supervisor's relentless nitpicking, creating a culture of fear and disrespect. Or, it could be overt discrimination based on your race, gender, age, or any other aspect of your identity. Sometimes, it is less obvious—a silent war characterized by uncooperative behavior, isolation, or exclusion from critical tasks or decisions. When it is occurring, we do not know exactly what is causing it and what we can do, which may be little, and this causes pain—and is one of the primary drivers of pain in my experience.

Even if you cannot put your finger on the cause, know the pain is real. The insidious nature of toxic workplaces is further underscored by research from Stanford professors Jeffrey Pfeffer and Stefanos A. Zenios, alongside Harvard's Joel Goh. Their extensive study revealed that workplace stressors, such as long hours, job insecurity, and lack of work-life balance, are not merely inconvenient but deadly. They found these factors contribute to at least 120,000 deaths annually and account for up to \$190 billion in healthcare costs. The comparison is staggering: workplace stress leads to deaths comparable to the fourth

and fifth largest causes of death in the country—heart disease and accidents. Shockingly, it surpasses deaths from diabetes, Alzheimer's, or influenza.

Their research, a meta-analysis of 228 studies, found that job insecurity alone increases the odds of reporting poor health by 50%, while long work hours increase mortality by nearly 20%. High job demands raised the odds of a physician-diagnosed illness by 35%. These findings highlight the severe physical and psychological impacts of workplace stress. The researchers were particularly struck by the significant impact of psychological stressors, such as work-family conflict and perceived work injustice, which had as much impact on health as long work hours or shift work. Employees dealing with work demands that interfere with family obligations were 90% more likely to report poor physical health, and those perceiving workplace unfairness were about 50% more likely to develop a physician-diagnosed condition. Pfeffer, Jeffrey, Stefanos A. Zenios, and Joel Goh. "Why Your Workplace Might Be Killing You." Stanford Graduate School of Business, 23 February 2015.

So, yes, your pain is very real. It is normal; it is common. The problem has been studied, but how does knowing that help you? From what you are living, I believe part of the problem is not only that it is difficult to understand the cause of it, but it is also difficult to understand how it impacts you—which is usually through our feelings and emotions, which manifest in our bodies, something most of us think we know but we do not. And, it is not until we are subjected to trauma that we experience feelings that do show us true pain, and we start to learn. At the same time, sadly these feelings do not come with a road map of how to deal with them. How to process through them.

The truth is emotions, feelings, and thoughts can be tricky to understand, especially when you are in a tough situation like a hostile work environment. Let that sink in. Embody that. Even if you think you know what is going on in your body because of the trauma, I believe you do not. You might feel something in your chest—a tightness, or maybe a sinking feeling in your stomach—but you are not exactly sure what it is. That's okay. It is normal to have trouble putting a name to what you are feeling. You might just know that you are upset, stressed, or on edge, but can't quite figure out why or what it is even called. This is a common experience, and the important thing is to start paying attention to those sensations.

The first step in understanding your emotions is to notice them without trying to label them right away. You might feel a heaviness when you walk into a meeting, or a rush of heat when your boss criticizes you. These are clues your body is giving you. Sometimes, we do not have the words to describe what's going on inside us, and that's perfectly normal. The key is to start asking yourself, "What am I feeling right now?" You might not have an answer immediately, and that's okay too. The process of questioning is what begins to bring clarity.

It is important to realize that emotions, feelings, or thoughts are not always clear-cut. They can be a mix of things—like feeling angry but also sad, or anxious yet hopeful. You might not even realize you are experiencing something until it is really strong, like when you suddenly want to cry or yell. This can be confusing, but it is part of being human. Emotions are your mind and body's way of telling you something is happening, even if you do not fully understand it yet. The more you practice noticing these feelings, the more you will start to recognize patterns in how you react to different situations.

And that awareness is often the first step to mindfulness.

As we will explore in this book, using mindfulness can help you get in touch with these emotions, feelings, and thoughts without feeling overwhelmed. It is about sitting with those feelings, even when they're uncomfortable, and letting them be. You do not have to have all the answers right away. Just start by acknowledging what you feel, even if it is just a vague sense of unease. Over time, this awareness will help you understand what your emotions are trying to tell you. Remember, it is okay to be uncertain or confused about what you are feeling. The important thing is to keep questioning and exploring those emotions, so you can better navigate the challenges in your work and life, by getting into a mindful state of mind, more often.

Practicing mindfulness is something Andrea learned after the fact. Let us turn back to her story.

In Andrea's case, at the time she was in the hostile work environment, she usually believed her manager's unconscious bias against her as an African American woman was clear. Her ideas were often dismissed, and she was accused of offenses that never happened. But she was not in touch with her feelings, and she did have doubts about whether her allegations against her manager were true, because, I think, a big part of her did not want to believe they were true. This was the nature of her stress, and this is very common among people in situations like hers.

After the fact, as it turned out, legally, she was proven correct. When we later questioned witnesses during litigation, they confirmed that Andrea was well-liked and her assertiveness was seen as a strength by her colleagues. Yet, Ms. Benson's perception was skewed by harmful stereotypes, like the "angry black woman" trope, which unfairly painted Andrea as hostile and unapproachable.

Andrea's experience is, sadly, not unique. Many individuals facing workplace hostility struggle with self-doubt and confusion, questioning if what they are experiencing is 'real' discrimination or just their perception.

Thus, recognizing the signs of hostility is crucial. If you feel a constant sense of dread, experience undermining behaviors, or find your ideas consistently dismissed, these could be red flags. Bad work environments can lead to emotional distress, anxiety, and self-doubt. You may start second-guessing your decisions, doubting your capabilities, and feeling undeserving of success. This consistent erosion of self-confidence can provoke severe emotional distress, reduce productivity, and lead to mental health issues like anxiety and depression. Recognizing these signs and acknowledging that they are neither normal nor acceptable is the crucial first step toward regaining control of your work life.

If any of these situations resonate with you, it is important to acknowledge the hostility you are facing. Recognizing that things are not okay is a powerful first step toward reclaiming your well-being. You deserve respect, kindness, and a sense of belonging at your workplace. You should not have to battle a daily onslaught of negative behaviors to make your mark. And this is true regardless of your legal rights. We are not going to focus on your legal rights through this book (though there is a chapter at the end), but the legal truth is not particularly relevant to what you deserve or how the events of the workplace manifest traumatically in your body and life.

In the following chapters, we will dive into the heart of this issue, arming you with effective strategies to navigate workplace hostility and regain control. For now, remember this: it is okay to admit you are facing a storm, but also remember that you are equipped with the strength to weather it, or you soon will be

aware of that. You have always been able to weather the storm, you might just need to remember that and have some inspiration and direction to help you. You are amazing on the inside and you need to remember that.

Our first victory was recognizing workplace hostility and just becoming aware of the concepts of some of the things that you may be experiencing. This chapter has likely been hard to read, but hopefully it starts to help you process the feelings by at least recognizing some of the boundaries of what is occurring. With this crucial step taken, we are now prepared to delve deeper into the root causes of workplace hostility in the next chapter.

But first, as we will do with every chapter as we finish it, let us journal to help us embody this chapter's insights and prepare us for the next. (By the way, you can skip this if you want, but I would not. Many people will and that is okay; but seriously, I will say it again, I think it is best if you stop and get some paper and a pen and take the next part seriously.)

Journaling as a Path to Healing

Journaling is more than just putting thoughts on paper; it is a powerful tool for healing and self-discovery. The end of each chapter in this book includes journaling prompts designed to help you reflect on your experiences and emotions. By engaging with these prompts, you create a safe space to process your thoughts and feelings, which is a crucial step in healing from workplace hostility. This chapter likely made feelings arise, and one of the best ways to process through them is to journal. (And, even after journaling, they will continue to come back up; but eventually if done right, they will subside over time, leaving you peaceful and empowered).

Journaling is key so I have made it a part of every chapter. Research shows that journaling can significantly reduce stress, improve mental clarity, and enhance overall emotional well-being. It allows you to articulate your experiences and identify patterns of behavior that may contribute to your distress. This self-awareness is the first step toward making positive changes in your work environment and personal life.

Journaling helps in three main ways:

Emotional Release: Writing about your feelings provides a healthy outlet for expressing emotions that might otherwise remain bottled up, leading to greater emotional clarity and relief. You keep trying, likely, to talk to people, or playing situations in your mind, over and over. Putting your thoughts on paper can help you have breakthroughs about those thoughts and process through the things you are experiencing. You can even release thoughts and emotions by burning them or tearing them up after you are finished.

Cognitive Processing: By reflecting on specific situations, you can gain new perspectives and insights. This helps in understanding the root causes of your feelings and in developing strategies to cope with similar situations in the future.

Self-Empowerment: Journaling empowers you to take control of your narrative. It helps in recognizing your strengths and the progress you are making, which can boost your confidence and resilience.

To get the most out of your journaling practice, it is important to purchase a physical journal. The act of physically writing out your thoughts can transfer the pain and emotions from your mind to the page, providing a tangible release. You can even think of this as you write: “I write to release. I write to release.” Then you can burn the paper to release.

This process helps to externalize your feelings, bringing them to the surface at the tip of your pen, making them easier to manage and understand. You may find that you need to continue releasing these emotions in various forms, whether through continued journaling, talking with a trusted friend, conscious breathing, using the RAIN or FEARS methods explained later in this book, or engaging in creative activities like drawing or music.

Set aside time each day to write in a quiet space where you won’t be disturbed. Be honest and open up in your writing, without worrying about grammar or spelling or anything else. This is a personal process for your growth and healing.

By committing to this practice, you are taking an active step toward reclaiming your well-being and transforming your work life. It is a game-changer because it shifts the focus from external circumstances to your inner strength and capacity for change. Embrace this journey, and you will find that each step brings you closer to a healthier, more fulfilling work experience.

Journal about whatever feels right. But, if you would like, here are some journaling topics we recommend to get you started:

- 1** Reflect on your work environment. Have you ever felt a similar sense of dread or discomfort as Andrea did? What were the situations or behaviors that led to these feelings?
- 2** Have you ever felt undermined or belittled in your workplace similar to Andrea's experiences? If so, can you identify specific instances or patterns that made you feel this way?
- 3** Considering Andrea's experience with her manager, have you had any biases (conscious or unconscious) in your workplace that affected how you or others are treated? How did you respond to these situations?
- 4** Think about the difference between a challenging work environment and a hostile one. Have you experienced both? How would you differentiate between the two based on your personal experiences?
- 5** After reading Andrea's story, how do you feel about your current work environment? What are some steps you think you could take if you recognized patterns of hostility in your own workplace?

CONTINUE THE JOURNEY

Your peace of mind deserves a plan.

The full book continues with practical mindfulness, breathing, journaling, resilience, communication, and employee-rights guidance for people navigating difficult workplaces.

CONTINUE WITH THE FULL BOOK ON AMAZON

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