

How to Vaporize the Crippling False Guilt Created by a Toxic Boss.

By Dr. Eric Kuelker

They all say the same thing. Every last person who has had a toxic boss. They say it over and over and over. Even though it crushes them, they repeat it.

Hi, I am Dr. Eric Kuelker and I am a psychologist who has spent 22,000 hours listening to clients in therapy. And every single week, week after week, I meet a new client. They are severely depressed, or highly anxious, and as they sit on my couch, they say “I think it is from my boss.” They then describe how their manager criticizes or bullies them, overloads them with work, excludes them, and a myriad of other disrespectful actions. All of these actions erode trust and create a climate of fear, guilt, and shame. As a result, they are waking at 4 am, shaking with anxiety, or so depressed that they want to die. And then they say it. They always do. They proclaim “I should be able to handle it!”

Every last one of them. “I should be able to handle it!!” It saddens me to hear people say this. In the first place, they are seriously psychologically injured. Their abusive manager's words have ripped a nasty hole in their self-esteem. Her lies created an atmosphere of chronic anxiety. His threats have created so much fear. The frequent criticism has eroded their self-confidence. But then the victims of this abuse and deceit believe that their emotional pain is illegitimate, or invalid. They think it is something that they should be able to endure, like a sunburn. Somewhat painful, but it should pass in a few days.

Yet this belief only compounds their depression. The psychological injury from the abusive manager is the source of their agony. But the shame about experiencing the pain makes things so much worse. Their depression intensifies as a result.

Consider it from another perspective. Suppose a pedestrian was hit by a drunk driver who blew through a red light. The ambulance wails up, and as the injured pedestrian is being loaded on the stretcher, he says “I should not be bleeding! I should not feel pain! I am so weak for having torn skin and broken bones! I should be able to handle it!” As onlookers, we can easily see how this belief is very unrealistic. After all, the victim was just hit by a 2 ton object travelling at 40 mph. That is a tremendous blow to the human body, far in excess of what it can handle. Those forces will cause muscles to rip, bones to break, ligaments to tear, and blood to spurt. The poor pedestrian should feel no guilt whatsoever for quivering, bleeding, or screaming with pain.

Yet our culture has a very poor understanding of how social forces can cause serious psychological injuries. We barely use the term “psychological injuries”. Instead, the dominant view of the cause of depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems is that the person has a chemical imbalance. Even though I live in a very affluent, well-educated city, so many clients come in and chatter about the concept that they have a chemical imbalance which causes them to cry, think negatively, lose sleep, etc. There are two serious problems with this concept. First, there is no scientific evidence that someone with depression (or any other mental health problem) has an imbalance in serotonin, dopamine, or any chemical in the brain. You might find this astonishing, given how widespread this belief is, but there is no research that supports the idea. I have looked, I spend most of my Saturday nights reading psychiatry journals (what a social

life!). The idea was very strongly pushed by the pharmaceutical companies, because if people believe that they have a chemical imbalance, then they will be willing to swallow a pill to correct the imbalance. But even though the drug companies spent billions of dollars marketing the idea, it is still false.

This leads to the second problem, that all the talk about chemical imbalances distracts people from the real cause of most cases of depression, anxiety, or other emotional problems. And that is the psychological injuries that people experience. For example, just yesterday my clients were in distress as a result of a) post-traumatic stress disorder from their workplace and a physically abusive father, b) severe bullying in elementary school, c) being raised by 2 alcoholic parents d) mother being extremely controlling and e) emotionally abusive mother. It is like that every single day of my working life. Nearly all the people who are in my office for therapy, are there because they experienced some form of abuse, neglect, poor parenting, or highly stressful life event (car accident, divorce, etc) or toxic boss. It is very rare that I meet someone who grew up and remained in a psychologically healthy environment, who develops a major mood disorder.

And managers have a major psychological impact on people's lives. We spend more time at work than with our family. We are always looking up the hierarchy to see if our superiors approve of us. When they do, when a manager gives lots of positive feedback, then we feel very good. Add in appropriate workloads, fair policies, and modest amounts of constructive criticism, then people really enjoy their jobs. People brighten up with a genuine smile and say "I love my job. My boss is great, he really knows how to relate to people." That is an example of how positive psychological forces lift people up, carry them along, and create positive feelings in them.

We carefully monitor our manager's reactions to us for another reason. They have a LOT of power over us. They are the ones who determine if we get a promotion. And we wrap so much of our identity and worth as a person around the work that we do. When we meet people at parties, after learning each others names, the next question is "So what do you do?" The person may proudly say that they are a vice president, or calmly tell you that they are an account manager, or look at the floor and mumble that they are "just a clerk." Our manager can turbo-charge our self-esteem with positive performance reviews, bonuses, and promotions. She is the one who controls strong psychological forces that can raise us up. But on the flip side, a boss can turn these forces against us to crush us down.

A manager who turns on an employee has not just one, but two forces at his disposal. Not only can he crush a person's self-concept through criticisms and demotions, he can inflict serious financial damage. Being fired has major financial consequences, ranging from loss of pay at present, to difficulty finding a new job with a black mark on your record. Depending on circumstances, people can lose their house. And the two forces interact. The financial weapon of firing an employee also scorches their self-concept. It is such a strong message that the person is a failure.

Let us step back for a moment. The belief that compounds the pain that people feel from their toxic boss is that "I should be able to handle it!" Yet that is because we do not understand the reality of a psychological injury. We do not recognize that a manager has very powerful

psychological forces at her disposal. She can use them to lift an employee high up, with positive feedback, honesty, and clarity. But, she can also turn these forces against an employee, to frighten them with financial loss, and to smash a nasty hole in their self-concept.

Realizing this point can help lift off the false guilt that “I should be able to handle it.” The first step is to accept that work has a major psychological impact on people, for better or for worse. If you feel great about a promotion, then you will feel terrible about a demotion. The second step is to realize that when a boss uses those forces to abuse you, that it will cause a serious psychological injury. After working with so many people over the years, I realize that *all of them experience injury!* I remember one client vividly. She had just finished university and received her professional designation as an engineer.¹ She had been on the job for 8 months when her boss marched in her office, dumped a stack of files on her desk and said “This file is worth 18 million dollars. Don't #*%& it up!” and marched out. The messages were clear. The boss was going to throw her into a task far above her skill level. He would not give any support at all. And failure would be catastrophic to her career. She was in so much anxiety that she wanted to die. And then she said it. “I should be able to handle it!”

I asked her about the person who held the position before her. She told me that he had lasted a year. “What about before him?” I inquired. “Oh, she lasted a year” my client said in between snuffles. “And before that?” I asked. “10 months for him” she said. “Before that?” I asked, receiving the same answer of a year. I leaned back in my chair, and said “So each of the 4 people that were in your position were probably just as bright and hardworking as you.” She nodded. I said “Each lasted a year before they could not handle your boss” She nodded again. I continued “The conclusion is that **nobody could handle it!**” She looked surprised, and then relaxed as the false guilt slipped off her shoulders. She made a rapid recovery, and found a job with a good manager that started her off on small projects to build her expertise. 3 months later, I received an email from her, describing how she loved her job, and was doing very well. I kept tabs on her old boss through the company website, and he had a brand new engineer report to him, and then leave within a year, for the next 3 years. When a bright young professional leaves every year, for 8 years in a row, that simply confirms that no one can handle it.

This is the take-away point for you. When you go to work, you are opening yourself up to powerful psychological forces. This not a problem if your manager uses those forces to encourage you to do excellent work, and sets appropriate boundaries. The forces then work to lift you up, and bolster your mental health. However, if your boss is toxic, and turns those forces against you, then you will experience serious psychological injury. And *no one* can handle the forces that a toxic boss unleashes on their subordinates. Any more than someone can handle the forces from a 2 ton object hitting their body at 40 mph.

So, you can let go of the false guilt created by the statement “I should be able to handle it.” Instead, tell yourself “I experienced a serious psychological injury. It is not surprising that I am in pain. Anyone else in my situation would feel the same way. My focus now is to recover from my injury.” Let the false guilt drop away, and keep your vision on the process of recovery, and returning to health.

¹ For reasons of confidentiality, she may or may not be an engineer. She might have been an accountant, project manager, architect, etc. You get the idea.

