



**Protecting Workers'  
Health Series N° 4**

**Raising awareness of**

# **Psychological Harassment at Work**

*Advice to health professionals,  
decision makers, managers,  
human resources directors,  
legal community,  
unions and workers*



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# Raising awareness of **Psychological Harassment at Work**

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# Preface

This document is the fourth in a series of occupational health documents entitled: *Protecting Workers' Health*. It is published by the *World Health Organization (WHO)* within the *Global Programme of Occupational Health*. It is the result of the implementation effort of the *Global Strategy on Occupational Health for All* as agreed upon by the WHO Collaborating Centres in Occupational Health.

The text was prepared by the *ISPESL/ICP Consortium for the WHO Collaborating Centre in Occupational Health* of Milan (Italy) in close cooperation with the *Institut Universitaire Romand de Santé au Travail*, Lausanne (Switzerland), acting as WHO Collaborating Centres.

Psychological harassment is a form of employee abuse arising from unethical behaviour and leading to victimization of the worker. It is an increasing worldwide problem which is still largely unknown and underestimated. It can produce serious negative consequences on the quality of life, and on individuals' health, mainly in the emotional, psychosomatic and behavioural areas. In addition, society as a whole becomes a victim because of increased pressure on social services and welfare.

This booklet aims at raising awareness of this growing issue of concern by providing information on its characteristics, such as the definition, differences between normal conflicts and psychological harassment at work, the ways it is practised, the consequences it can produce on health and society. Special attention is devoted to the causes that favour its development and the measures to be adopted in order to combat it and react to it.

Since psychological harassment is widespread in all occupational sectors, this publication has the intent to promote health and safety at work among health professionals, decision makers, managers, human resources directors, legal community, unions and workers worldwide.

The only way to combat psychological harassment at work is to unite the efforts of all these players, while viewing the issue from different angles.

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*One morning you get to your office, sit down at your desk, and turn on your computer. Just like the day before, like many other days before, but that morning there is something new in the air, something unusual, vaguely hostile. Maybe it is the boss who, absorbed by his thoughts, has not said hello to you in the corridor; maybe it is your colleagues who have not invited you to have coffee with them. How strange, they normally call you!*

*Maybe it is that secretary down there, the one who sees you and whispers something in her friend's ear, you wonder why..*

*Maybe it does not mean anything, it is only a coincidence, and tomorrow everything will go back to normal. Maybe, though, something has broken down in the relations between you and your work environment. Maybe someone has decided to turn against you, to isolate you, to exclude you from the group, and from that day on, little by little, everything begins to change at work... to get worse.*

*It is a chain of apparently unrelated events concealing a precise, progressive strategy. The threat at the beginning is surreptitious and indirect, made up of hints, glances, and remarks. At first, it is difficult to grasp them, to understand, to identify. But soon after it becomes ever more obvious and violent. It seems irreversible. And whoever you are, you feel terribly alone: you do not know that millions of other people, all over the world, are in the same trap. You are not aware that it is a social evil which is growing more serious, more widespread and yet is still hardly known. It has a precise name: it is called mobbing.*



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