

A slow poison

Behind the alarming statistics on workplace bullying are personal stories of grief and hardship, revealed during a parliamentary inquiry.

STORY: JANE FAURE-BRAC

John McPhilbin spends his day on the phone helping people who've been injured at work. But these are not just physical injuries, more often they are psychological injuries as a result of bullying.

People come to the Injured Workers Support Network with nowhere to turn; broken, depressed and humiliated. John is a very sympathetic ear to them. He knows exactly how they feel. He was one of them.

John considers himself a lucky survivor of workplace bullying. Countless others lose their job, family, self-esteem and in extreme cases take their own lives. Now with a degree behind him and in a job where he feels valued by his employer, John wants to try to change the system which pushed him to the brink and prevent others from going there too.

"You just can't underestimate how damaging a psychological injury from bullying is. I was depressed, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't get out of bed, I couldn't go into work. I'd just stopped functioning," John says.

That was nine long years ago, during which John fought a bitter battle for justice after being bullied at work.

As an ex-military man, he understood the importance of protecting staff in the line of duty, which was one of the reasons he took a job with a security firm when he returned to civilian life.

"Roughly one in three employees in the workplace has experienced some form of bullying or poor behaviour and one in two has witnessed it"

John loved his new job as operations manager. A natural problem solver, John was good at his job and got results. He soon found himself promoted to a national role, but that's when things started to go wrong.

In the new role John says the workplace culture was driven by profit margins and bonuses and he saw safety being compromised.

"It was definitely a case of the workplace culture engendering the behaviour," he says.

"Once the change from safety to profit was entrenched, there was no going back. In one month, the profit