

Trapped in the past

Post-traumatic embitterment disorder is a powerful psychological reaction to negative life events

Writing
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Most of us have heard of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Indeed, employers are aware of their obligation to manage stress in the workplace. Very few of us have heard of the term ‘post-traumatic embitterment disorder’ (PTED), however, even though the condition is recognised in the US and Europe, and many people in the UK will be familiar with its symptoms.

Embittered people are typically good people who have worked hard at something important, such as a job, a relationship or an activity. Then, when something unexpectedly awful happens – for example, they might be disciplined, lose out on an expected promotion, or be made redundant – they feel a profound sense of injustice. Then they are left with a crippling emotional condition that prevents them from moving on with their lives. Internally, they feel abused, betrayed and violated. Outwardly, they appear aggressive, angry, hateful, hopeless and non-cooperative. Individuals who fall into this category find it difficult to trust others. They believe it is the world, not them, that needs to change.

What is PTED?

PTED is a cocktail of complex, deep-rooted emotions that can be summed up as a psychological reaction to negative life events. It can also be an all-consuming, long-lasting and life-changing condition. PTED sufferers talk of their desire to seek justice or revenge and most cannot see a happy future. Thoughts of self-harm and suicide are high on their agenda. A high percentage of sufferers are unable to cope with simple everyday tasks.

In the workplace, PTED sufferers are deeply resentful of formal processes and performance-improvement plans. Often, they will admit they do not trust management, and their fear of humiliation or social rejection is compounded by worries that they have incurred permanent damage to their professional reputation. They don’t trust the system. They refuse to cooperate with their employer. And their unhealthy, and often perverse, desire for revenge may even lead to vexatious grievances and tribunal claims. In some cases, these workers are so visibly angry that they may be labelled ‘the workplace bully’.

When a PTED sufferer no longer trusts their employer, he or she is not likely to perform productively. The organisation, in turn, could invoke capability or conduct processes that ultimately lead to the employee being subjected to disciplinary action, suspension or dismissal. But is this the right course of action to take when the employee may be suffering from a serious psychological condition? PTED undoubtedly destroys families and lives when it goes undiagnosed.

Shedding light on the issue

A PTED sufferer typically needs to understand and discuss the issue that triggered the condition in the first place, before he or she will feel able to move on with their life. German psychiatrist Michael Linden is adamant that in chronic cases of PTED, the patient will probably need psychological intervention. He puts forward an approach called ‘wisdom therapy’ as a way to support

WORKING WITH PTED

The dos and don’ts of supporting a suspected PTED sufferer

- 1** Do engage with the individual and encourage them to talk about their concerns. Being listened to, and feeling believed in, soothes an embittered mind.
- 2** Do consider whether an employee who has been absent for a prolonged period of time due to work-related stress may actually be suffering from PTED.
- 3** Do update your organisation’s policies and procedures to recognise PTED as both a psychological condition and a disability. Then work with an expert mental health team to ensure these policies and procedures are followed.
- 4** Do work with an occupational health expert who understands PTED.
- 5** Do consider coaching. A good coach will not tell their client what to do. Instead, they will encourage the client to come up with conclusions independently. Coaching may equip the embittered mind

with the tools it needs to cope in future.

- 6** Do not insist on mediation. It is likely to be a waste of money, resources and time. The embittered mind is incapable of empathising since it believes it is other people who need to change.
- 7** Do not rush into a performance-improvement process, since poor performance is a symptom of PTED.
- 8** Do not embark on a process of dismissal on grounds of capability without seeking expert advice.
- 9** Do not expect too much from an employee who has trust issues. Just be open, honest and reassuring, and appoint a ‘workplace buddy’ if appropriate.
- 10** Do talk openly about PTED to the team member in question. Reference the work of Professor Michael Linden and the National Bullying Helpline. This will demonstrate an understanding. Since the individual may not even have heard of PTED, the discovery could prove to be a ‘lightbulb moment’.

PTED sufferers. Wisdom therapy gives patients problem-solving skills and teaches them how to achieve a change of perspective, empathise with their perceived aggressors, accept unwanted emotions and achieve emotional serenity.

Ultimately, PTED needs to be recognised in the UK for what it is: a debilitating mental illness, where sufferers are trapped in the past, unable to move on with their lives. A recent caller to the National Bullying Helpline, which I founded, said that he had searched high and low to find a phrase that adequately described his state of mind. Neither his wife nor his GP understood him. He alleged that a former employer had bullied him more than a decade ago and he had felt unable to function properly since. We referred him to our PTED research, which he described as “a lightbulb moment”. On the surface, a PTED sufferer may appear to be having a mental breakdown. If the condition is recognised and treated, however, PTED is not the end of the world. **E**

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