

4 signs your workplace is toxic – and what to do about it

Some workplaces can be really negative or ‘toxic’ environments – and it’s more common than you might think.

More than 60% of people have found themselves in a toxic workplace at some point in their working lives, according to research conducted on behalf of SEEK.

But people aren’t always sure how to read the signs of a dysfunctional workplace environment or what to do if they find themselves stuck in one.

Here are the signs to look for, plus tips from SEEK’s Resident Psychologist Sabina Read, on managing a toxic workplace.

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Toxic workplaces can take many forms. But often, a toxic workplace is one with behaviour that makes it an unpleasant place to work – and that behaviour isn't dealt with.

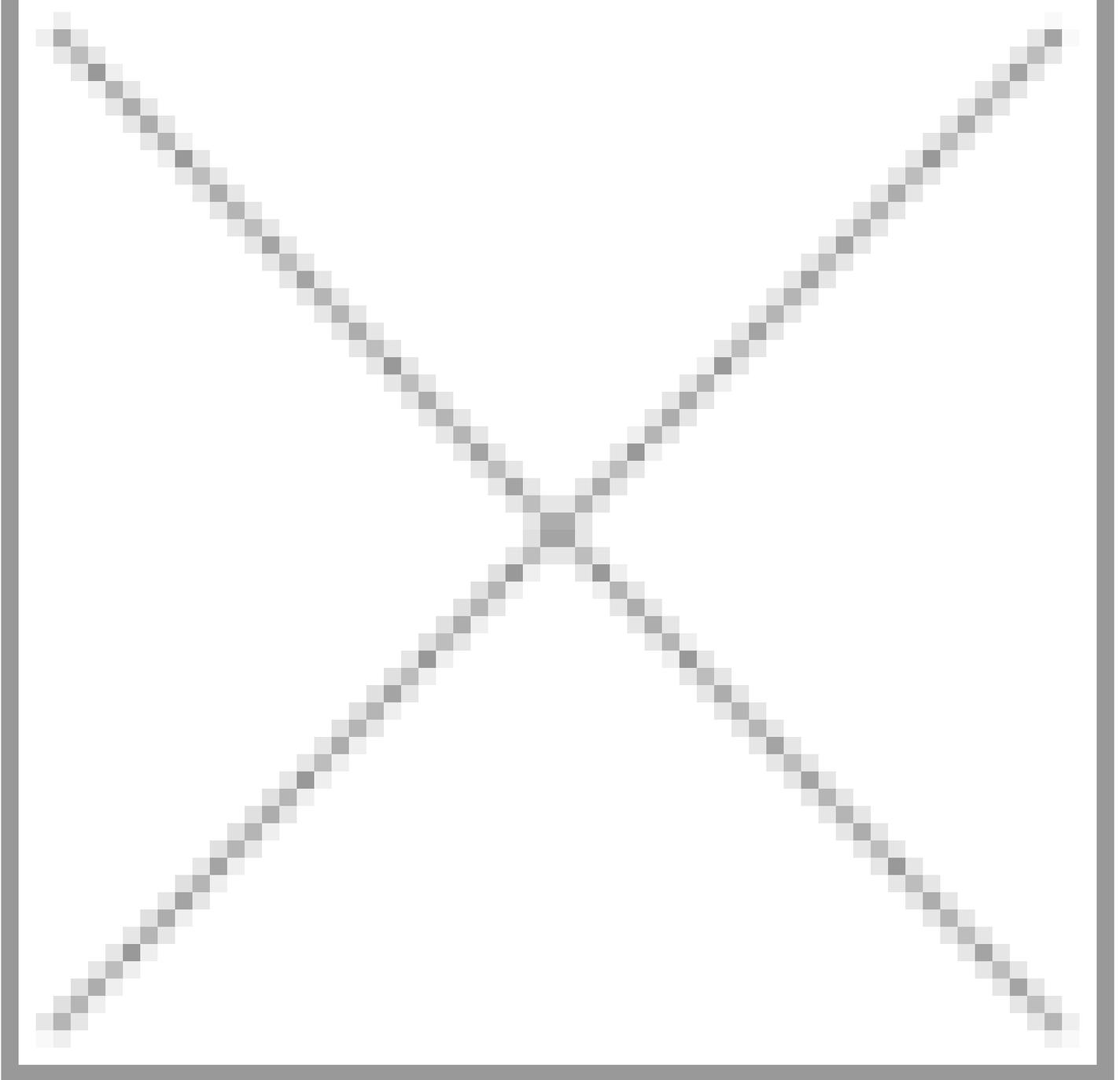
“At their very core, toxic workplaces are characterised by the unhealthy behaviours of humans that work there, and the relational impact these behaviours have on both those in the firing line as well as bystanders caught in the crossfire,” Read says.

Toxic workplaces can occur at all levels of an organisation, often (but not always) based on seniority and title, and they always include people whose behaviour lacks “empathy, compassion and understanding”.

“Unfortunately, this unhealthy behaviour is often rewarded, either explicitly or implicitly, which

reinforces it. The impact can be devastating, leaving people feeling negative, resentful, withdrawn and lacking in humour and trust,” Read adds

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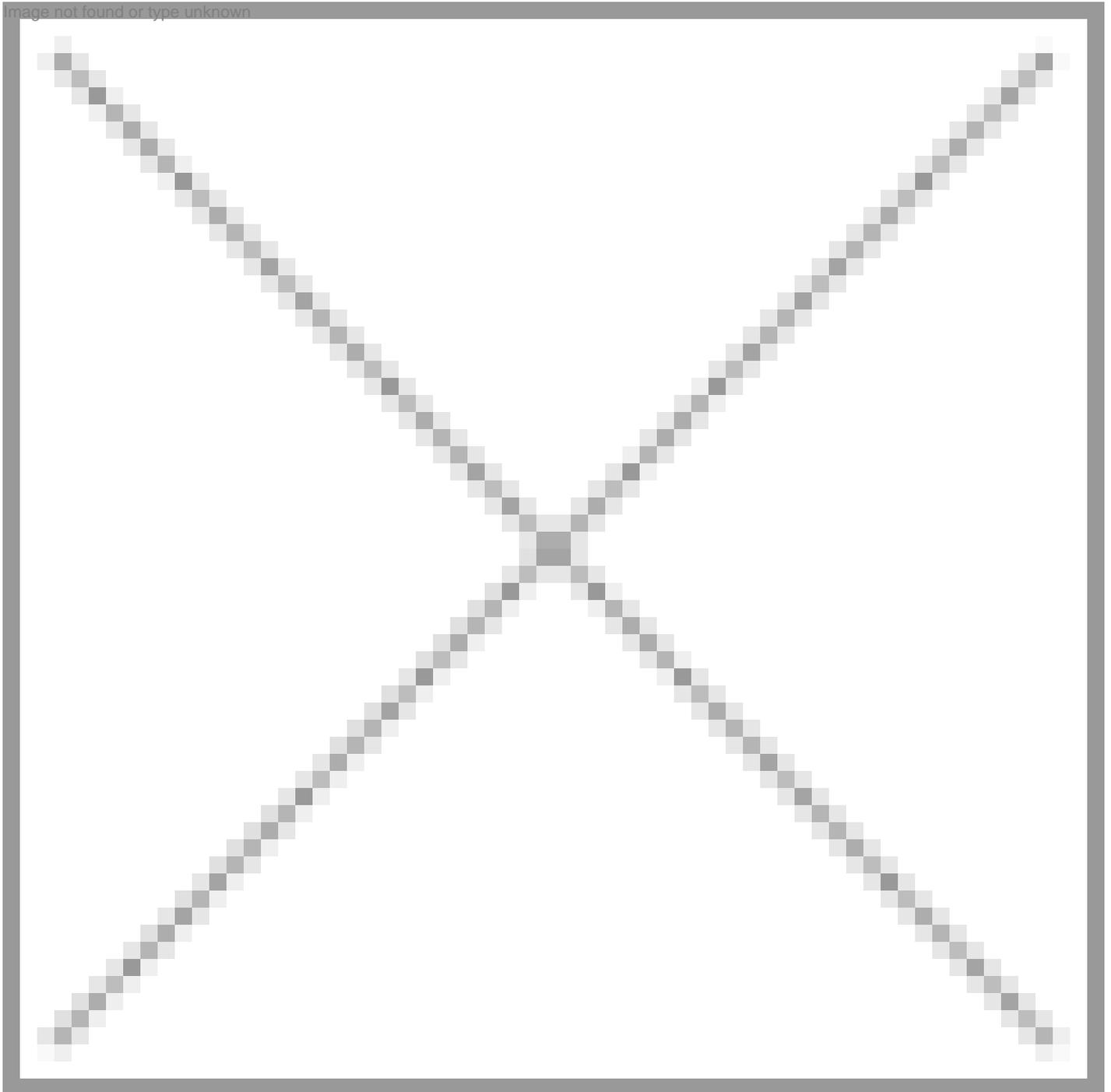


So, how can you be sure that the workplace you're in is toxic? Through the research, SEEK asked Kiwis what they thought the best indicators were. Here are the top four signs people told us about:

1. Where bullying occurs and no action is taken when it's reported (53%)
2. There are cliques, gossiping and rumours (52%)
3. 'Staff constantly feel they have to 'walk on eggshells' in case they upset someone (45%)
4. Different employees receive different messages from leadership (42%)

Read says toxic workplaces also typically involve a lack of praise and positive feedback,

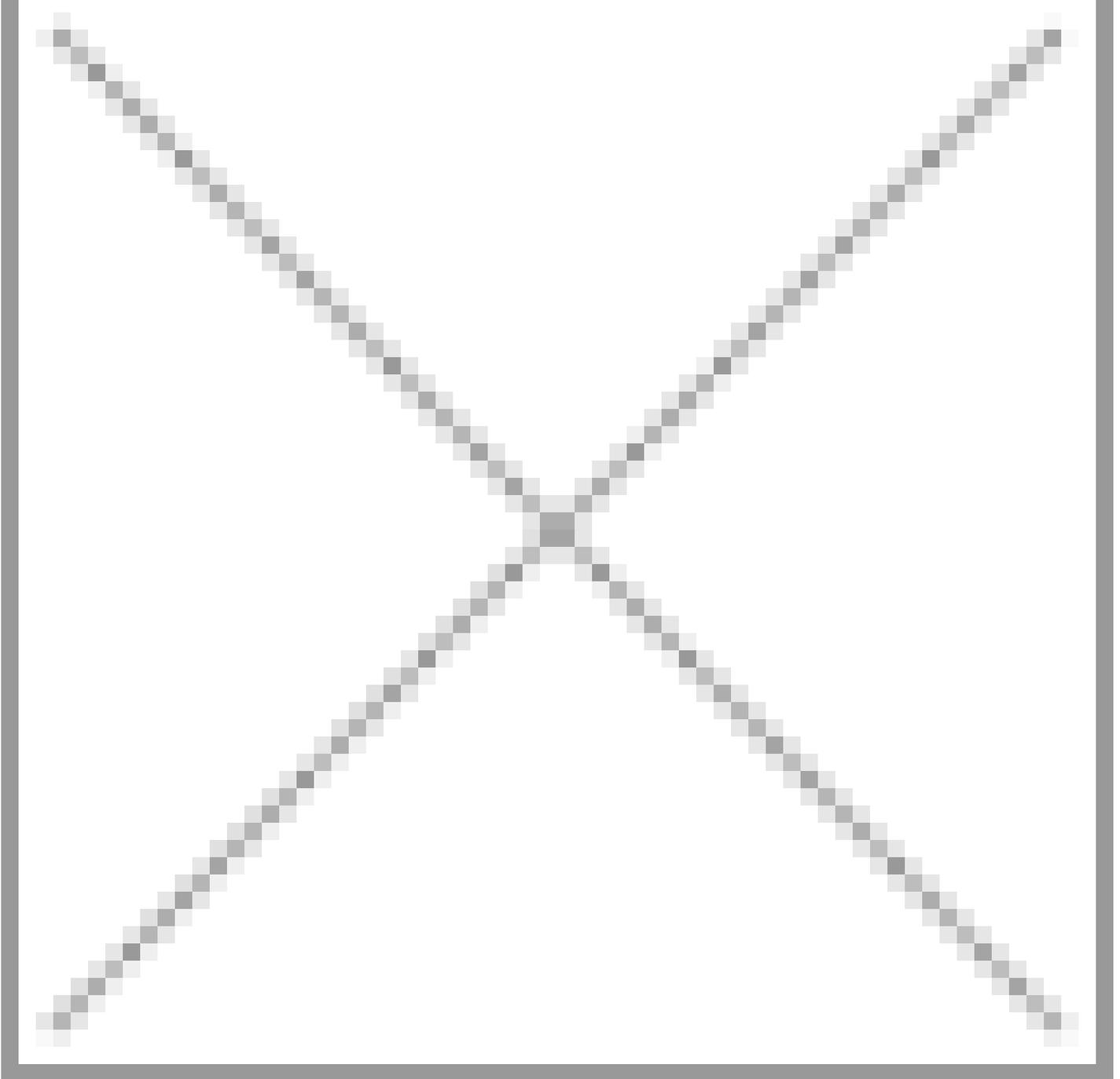
avoidance, and even secrecy. “This results in people keeping their grievances and concerns to themselves or sharing them on the underground grapevine,” she says.



It doesn't matter where you are in your working life – a toxic work environment can negatively impact mental health, self-confidence, job satisfaction, and even the ability to do your job well.

More than 89% of people reported that toxic work environments have a big impact on their mental health. So much so that 53% reported leaving their job because of it.

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Leaving a job because of a toxic workplace isn't always an option. The main reason people don't leave is they simply can't afford to quit – that's what 53% of people told us.

But, if you have to or choose to stay, here are some of Read's tips to help shift and manage the toxicity.

1. **Speak up (if you can)**

Read explains that while it can be hard to speak up, not challenging bad behaviour can contribute to a negative environment.

"While no-one likes to think of themselves as being part of the toxic problem, we are all at risk, when we look away rather than speak up," she says.

If you feel comfortable you could meet with your manager or a leader to talk about what you're experiencing and how it is impacting the workplace. If that's not possible in your situation, you could try raising your concerns with an HR manager if your workplace has one.

2.

Manage relationships

Not every workplace relationship will be as we hope or fit with our style. With that in mind, it's important to think about which relationships need time and energy in order to improve, and which ones are currently in a good spot.

Read explains that relationship difficulties are often due to unmet needs. So, it makes sense to work out whether you, the other person, or something else could be standing in the way of it being a better working relationship.

3.

Manage your health

A toxic workplace can dial up self-doubt and fuel negative self-talk. According to Read, "mental health self-care strategies include maintaining routine, focusing on things you can control, limiting excessive workloads, taking annual leave and regular breaks, and finding supportive people to talk to."

Exercise is also key, she adds. Keeping yourself active during the day helps improve focus and allows your mind the break it needs to stay sharp and creative, so taking regular breaks is recommended.

4.

Recruit a workplace bestie

Whatever you are going through at work – good, bad or somewhere in between – having positive relationships at work will help you manage any situation.

Nearly 80% of people report that positive relationships with colleagues have significant benefits when it comes to workplace mental health, while 71% say positive relationships with bosses/managers impacts directly on happiness at work.

Read agrees and explains, "being connected in meaningful ways to at least one colleague helps bring a sense of belonging, fun and emotional safety to our work." This is especially important during tougher times or where toxicity rears its ugly head.

It may be difficult depending on your environment, but see if you can [strike up or grow friendships at work](#) – perhaps through social clubs or groups, or try finding similarities or mutual interests with your colleagues. Even having just one colleague who you can lean on may improve your experience at work.

5.

Put an action plan in place

There's no easy answer to whether staying or leaving is best, but if the negative elements of your workplace are dominating your thoughts and impeding your day-to-day life, it may be time to consider a change.

“At the end of the day, if the fear and distress associated with staying is louder than the fear of jumping ship, the situation may be untenable,” Read says. Start to map out an exit strategy by exploring other options, [speaking to your network](#) and, when you are ready, get serious about job hunting.

As Read says, “working with others often constitutes either the best or worst parts of a job.”

So, if you find yourself stuck in a situation where relationships or behaviours are toxic, it can have a significant impact on your work – and your life in general. But employing some of these strategies may help you navigate a negative environment and aim towards a healthier and happier work life.

Where to go for more help

A negative work environment is one thing, but if what you're dealing with could be bullying or harassment, there are places you can go to for more information and help:

- [New Zealand Human Rights Commission](#)
- [Employment New Zealand](#)
- [Employment Ombudsman](#)
- [New Zealand Now](#)

Everyone has the right not to be bullied or harassed at work.

Source: Independent research conducted by Nature on behalf of SEEK, interviewing 4000 Kiwis annually. Published March 2021.