

Bullying and harassment

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Bullying and harassment can contribute to work related stress. These pages provide advice and guidance about dealing with such behaviours:

Advice for organisations

What should we be doing as an organisation to tackle bullying and harassment?

- **Devise and implement a bullying and harassment policy**

This should summarise your organisation's approach to tackling bullying and harassment, and could include:

- a statement from senior management endorsing the policy
- definitions of what constitutes unacceptable behaviour
- a statement about responsibilities regarding the elimination of bullying behaviour
- information about how individuals can initially raise their concerns about bullying
- information about sources of emotional support
- the procedures that the organisation will follow for both the complainant and alleged bully
- information about the potential outcomes and rehabilitation

More detailed help with devising a policy can be found on the useful websites below.

- **Promote a culture where bullying and harassment is not tolerated**

This can include:

- accept that bullying can occur in any organisation
 - understand what bullying and harassment are and what the consequences can be
 - consult and discuss with your staff
 - devise a policy and ensure your managers and harassment advisors are trained to implement it
 - promote the policy within the organisation and enforce against the policy
- **Be aware of the organisational factors that are associated with bullying, and take steps to address them**

Responsibility for dealing with bullying and harassment rests with the organisation, and prevention strategies must be organisation-wide. Many organisations adopt a zero tolerance approach. Some factors associated with bullying include:

- perceived imbalance of power; few consequences perceived by perpetrator
- internal competition; reward systems focused solely on outputs
- organisational change

As an organisation, to tackle these factors, you might, for example:

- encourage a more collaborative, less autocratic management style in your managers
- encourage staff to attend diversity training
- publicise your bullying and harassment policy, and explaining the consequences of bullying within the organisation
- encourage control and choice for staff, as far as possible
- explore levels of competition between individuals and teams
- consider alternative incentives to achieving high performance
- ensure you are confident and comfortable in managing poor performance
- consult staff regularly and keep them informed during times of change
- ensure your managers have sufficient support to help them implement the policy

What is workplace bullying?

Bullying at work can take many forms. It can involve:

- ignoring or excluding someone
- spreading malicious rumours or gossip
- humiliating someone in public
- giving someone unachievable or meaningless tasks
- constantly undervaluing someone's work performance

There is no legal definition of workplace bullying. 'Bullies' are often – but not always – more senior than the person they are bullying. 'Bullies' sometimes target groups as well as individuals.

Harassment relates to unlawful discrimination on the grounds of race, sex, disability, age, religion or belief, or sexual orientation. [The Protection from Harassment \(Northern Ireland\) Order \(1997\)](#) covers harassment more generally.

Find out more

- [Equality Commission for Northern Ireland](#)

Advice for managers

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A member of my team has told me they are being bullied – what should I do?

- **Follow the procedures laid down in your organisation's bullying and harassment policy**

The policy should include definitions of what your organisation regards as standards of acceptable behaviour. The first step for staff who feel they are being bullied is most likely to have an informal discussion with you as their line manager, or a designated colleague, to explore their concerns. Other steps include:

- informally raising the issue with the alleged 'bully'
- mediation

- making a formal complaint
- legal action
- **Be sensitive, objective, and seek information**

Encourage your member of staff to describe examples of the alleged bullying and what outcome they would like to see. To be fair to both parties, you need to decide whether the behaviour is bullying or harassment. The alleged 'bully' may have no idea about the effect their behaviour is causing. Malicious allegations can also happen.

You may wish to refer to your organisation's bullying policy or harassment advisors to help you with this. You also need to let the member of staff know what their options are in terms of support, progressing the complaint, and relevant policies.

- **Identify a way forward**

Many cases of bullying can be resolved informally – you may wish to approach the people concerned confidentially to explore and discuss the allegations and work out a way forward. For more serious matters, you will need to seek the support of your organisation's harassment advisors, human resources team, other organisational support services, or outside organisations. In serious cases, your staff member may wish to make an informal or formal complaint, or even take legal action.

- **Options for tackling the problems**

Depending on the circumstances, bullying and harassment can be tackled in a number of ways. These include:

- an agreement between the parties on standards of behaviour
- mentoring
- performance management
- training
- transfer of staff
- rehabilitation, including emotional support

I think a member of my team is being bullied – what should I do?

- **Consult your organisation's bullying and harassment policy**

Your first port of call should be your bullying policy. This will give you advice about how your organisation approaches bullying, harassment and unacceptable behaviour, and the steps you should follow. It may include advice on how to approach the person you are concerned about, or point you in the direction of trained harassment advisors or others who can support both you and the member of staff.

- **Be sensitive**

Raising bullying or harassment issues with one of your staff can be very uncomfortable – for them and you. It may be that you've misinterpreted the situation, and the person you think is being bullied does not perceive any unacceptable behaviour at all. The relationship that you have with your staff depends on many factors such as personality, management style and the culture of the team or organisation.

How managers tackle this issue may be very different. One way would be to create the atmosphere and circumstances for the individual to raise the problem themselves – you could perhaps ask open questions such as 'how are things going?'

How can I stop bullying and harassment in my team?

Responsibility for dealing with bullying and harassment rests with the organisation, and prevention strategies must be organisation-wide. Many organisations adopt a zero tolerance approach, and this requires full support from management – including line managers.

Some factors associated with bullying include:

- perceived imbalance of power
- 'bully' thinks they can get away with it
- internal competition where reward systems focus solely on outputs
- organisational change

As a line manager, you may want to tackle some of these factors by, for example:

Communication

- ensuring the management style is collaborative and not autocratic
- consulting staff regularly and keeping them informed during times of change

Training

- encouraging staff to attend diversity training

Policy

- publicising your organisation's bullying and harassment policy
- explaining the consequences of bullying within the organisation

Management

- encouraging control and choice for staff, as far as possible
- exploring levels of competition between individuals and teams
- considering alternative incentives to achieving high performance
- ensuring you are confident and comfortable in managing poor performance

Find out more

- [Harassment and bullying at work](#) – Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

Advice for individuals

Bullying at work can take many forms – some can be directed at you personally, others relate to work activities

There is no legal definition of workplace bullying. However, experts believe that bullying involves negative behaviour being targeted at an individual, or individuals, repeatedly and persistently over time.

Negative behaviour

Negative behaviour includes:

- Ignoring or excluding you
- Giving you unachievable tasks or 'setting you up to fail'
- Spreading malicious rumours or gossip
- Giving you meaningless tasks or unpleasant jobs
- Making belittling remarks
- Undermining your integrity
- Withholding information deliberately
- Making you look stupid in public
- Undervaluing your contribution –not giving credit where it is due

Harassment

Harassment, can relate to unlawful discrimination, which can be on the grounds of race, sex, disability, age, religion or belief, or sexual orientation. [The Protection from Harassment \(Northern Ireland\) Order \(1997\)](#) covers harassment more generally.

How can bullying or harassment make you feel?

Bullying can impact on your health, for example:

- It can result in psychological health problems such as depression, anxiety or low self-esteem
- It can result in physical health problems such as stomach problems, or sleep difficulties
- If you've witnessed the bullying of a colleague, this can also be very upsetting and can impact on your health.
- Your performance at work can be affected.

What can I do?

It can be extremely upsetting to be on the receiving end of what you perceive to be harassing or bullying behaviour, or to witness it. You may feel you are being overly sensitive or it may lower your self-esteem. If you are not sure how to tackle this very awkward subject there are a number of things you can do and many sources of support and information.

- **Consult your organisation's bullying and harassment policy**
If your organisation has a policy, it should tell you what your first steps should be. The policy should include definitions of what your organisation regards as standards of acceptable behaviour. It should also advise you on how to start to address the issue – the first step is normally an informal discussion with your manager or a designated colleague to explore your concerns.

If your organisation does not have a policy, try the following:

- **Speak to someone you feel comfortable talking to about your concerns.**
This may be your manager, a colleague, a TU or staff representative, your employee assistance programme or other sources of support such as the helplines listed below. You could describe the behaviour you've been experiencing and get their opinion of whether it may constitute bullying or harassment. You may also want to mention your concerns, anonymously if necessary, to any stress working groups that your organisation has in place.
- **Resolve the issue informally.**
Many issues can be resolved informally. This may involve you, with the support of a colleague or manager, approaching the person whom you believe is treating you unfairly or inappropriately. You could describe the unacceptable behaviour and explain how it makes you feel and how you would like it

to change. It may be that the perpetrator does not realise their behaviour is upsetting, so they need to be given the chance to modify their actions.

- **Mediation**

Mediation by a neutral third party can often be helpful in resolving difficult issues such as bullying or harassment. There may be trained mediators within your organisation, or contact one of the organisations listed below who may be able to provide such services.

- **If informal resolution has not worked, follow a formal complaints procedure.**

Your organisation will most likely have a formal complaints procedure. You need to follow this. If your complaint is upheld, your organisation may pursue a number of options.

- **Legal action**

Taking legal action is a complex process. Both you and your employer should take expert advice and legal representation.

Where can I get more help?

You are not on your own. There are a number of sources of help and advice. Searching the internet will identify a number of useful websites. For example:

[Equality Commission](#) - Advice for both employees and employers