

## FEAT FACTSHEET

# How to deal with workplace bullying

### What is workplace bullying?

Bullying behaviour is not about being bossy. It's not about the occasional, angry outburst on the subject of meeting work targets or reaching and maintaining standards. It's about persistent criticism and condemnation.

If you tell someone often enough that they are stupid, hopeless and not up to the job, they are likely to start believing it, and to imagine that it's entirely their own fault.

Workplace bullying occurs when someone persistently acts in a discriminatory way towards an employee which hurts, criticises or condemns them. It means the bully is abusing his or her power or position to:

- undermine an individual's ability, causing them to lose their self-confidence and self-esteem
- intimidate someone in a way that makes him or her feel very vulnerable, alone, angry and powerless.
- These attacks on someone's performance are unpredictable, unreasonable and often unseen, creeping up on the person long before they are aware of what's happening. It wears the employee down, making them feel belittled and inadequate, and gradually makes them lose faith in themselves. It causes constant stress and anxiety, which can cause ill health and mental distress.

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Telephone **01592 749880** or visit **[www.journeytowork.co.uk](http://www.journeytowork.co.uk)**

## How do I know if I'm being bullied?

Most bullying at work is not physical, but psychological. It's a hidden, yet repetitive progression of small events and persistent harassment. It can take on a perfectly innocent appearance; for example, it may be an apparently harmless joke, at your expense, but if you object, the bully may accuse you of having no sense of humour, or of taking things too seriously. Over time, being on the receiving end of these kinds of tactics can feel like torture, causing real mental distress and potentially ruining careers.

A bully will usually combine various types of behaviour. Following are some of the typical types of behaviour that occur when someone is bullying you:

Obvious bullying might consist of:

- using physical violence towards you
- shouting or swearing at you, in public or private
- instant rages over trivial matters
- humiliating you in front of colleagues
- deliberately ignoring or isolating you in public
- never listening to your point of view
- labelling you or calling you names
- making personal insults or ridiculing you

## What are the effects of bullying?

The stress on people who are slowly and persistently undermined can cause physical and emotional symptoms. This often happens if their complaints about ill treatment are not taken seriously. They are then left feeling angry and with a strong sense of injustice.

As a rule, bullying is not a subject that's readily discussed among colleagues, even though it might be happening to a number of people in the same workplace. If someone believes they alone have been singled out for attack, they can end up feeling it's their own fault. This can happen even when their work record was unblemished until there was a sudden (and relevant) change in circumstances – the arrival of a new boss or a change of management. In accepting the blame, their self-confidence crumbles and this inevitably undermines their performance. In these circumstances, people may well start taking time off work.

## **What can I do about being bullied?**

Bullying managers lead using fear and aggression. Their power lies in frightening people to such an extent that nothing is said. But your power lies in the possibility that you might speak out.

Making that decision may not be easy, because it involves taking risks. You may be afraid of making things worse. You may be believed, or you may be dismissed as a troublemaker or as someone who simply can't cope. You may not know who to complain to, or be afraid that they may take the bully's side and that it will be your word against theirs.

In the end, you may be left with three choices:

- Hand in your notice, and escape the problem altogether.
- Accept what is happening, because you have financial commitments and you need the job.
- Stand firm, and take action.

The third option may seem the right thing to do, however, it is probably a more realistic option for those people who are working with a company which has an established human resources department; it may be more difficult (though not impossible) to achieve if you are employed in a small local business, for example, where there are only a handful of employees.

## **What kind of action should I take?**

Confronting the bully may actually enrage the bully more, rather than persuade them to see reason. It can result in a worsening of the bullying, and is generally unsafe. However, if you do decide on this course of action, stay calm and stand firm, and don't allow yourself to be a victim. Don't take any action alone, if you are afraid of losing control of the situation.

Instead of resorting to confrontation, you could seek immediate advice from your HR department, health and safety or welfare officers; or your union representative, if you have one. Find out if your employer has a policy on bullying and harassment. Follow the company's official grievances procedures, with the help of your advisers. (These should be present even in a small business.)

Try to avoid situations where you are alone with the bully. Try to have others at hand to witness bullying incidents. Seek proof of the bullying as soon as you identify it, and talk to colleagues to see if they will support you. You will have to be aware that people may be nervous of providing support for fear that they may end up being targeted by the bully as well.

Log dates and details of all the incidents that cause you distress and all the undermining, cutting remarks, or the attacks on your character or personal ability. Incidents may seem trivial in themselves, but put together, they can form a clear pattern.

Make sure you know exactly what your job description states, so that you can check whether the responsibilities you are given match it. Keep copies of all annual appraisals and correspondence relating to your ability to do the job. Keep everyone helping you informed of all developments, in writing, and ask for their written responses.

It may well be that leaving your job becomes the best option. Don't regard this as defeat, but as a positive decision, taken because things are otherwise stacked against you. It's your way of getting back in control. Let your organisation know why you are leaving. It may well help others in the future.

### **What can I do to improve the way I feel?**

Practising some basic self-assertiveness skills can help you to feel better about yourself, and help you to deal with awkward situations that may arise. Look for local classes on the Internet or at your local library.

Another way of helping yourself is to set about counteracting the effects the bullying has had on you. You may want to try counselling: it can help to have someone objective to talk to, who has the time to listen to how you are feeling, with no distractions. Note: a counsellor will not offer you advice on what to do, but explore how you are feeling and suggest ways to cope better with difficult situations.

Remember, everyone has the right to go to their place of work and be treated with respect, and to be allowed to carry out the job they were employed to do without fear of being victimised. You are the most important person in all of this, so look after yourself.

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