



For better
mental health

How to...
deal with
bullying at work



How to... deal with bullying at work

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“I used to be known as a confident high-flyer, but since he took over I know my confidence has been undermined and I feel under stress at work. He just picks on me constantly; it seems nothing I ever do is right. I am just always depressed, both at work and at home now. It really can't go on, but what can I do? I need this job.”

“Going to work suddenly seems like entering a war zone without a weapon. I think I am being bullied, but surely bullying stops at the school gates, doesn't it?”

“The thought of having to get up to go to work causes me such panic and fear that I am physically sick.”

Bullying at work is a much greater problem than people once realised. It's bad for the individuals and for the organisations they work for. But it's a problem that can be difficult to identify and tackle. This booklet explains how and why bullying takes place, and what can be done about it. It also suggests where you can find further information and advice.

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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 is offensive discrimination, through persistent, vindictive, cruel or humiliating attempts to hurt, criticise and condemn an individual or a group of employees. 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, typically. It's been likened to a cancer that creeps 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.

Why is it so hard to recognise?

This is a major problem, because bullying is rarely confined to obviously unkind remarks or open aggression. Covert bullying is hidden bullying: underhand, and difficult to confront, especially if your confidence and self-esteem is already undermined by it. Because it's so difficult to identify in the workplace, it requires much more investigation.



Most bullying at work is not blatant physical violence, but psychological violence. 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. If you object, the bully may accuse you of having no sense of humour, or of taking things too seriously. Such incidents have a drip, drip effect.

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Open bullying might consist of:

- physical violence
- 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
- taking disciplinary action out of the blue
- never listening to your point of view
- labelling you or calling you names
- personal insults or ridicule
- sarcasm
- smear campaigns.

Covert bullying might include:

- constantly undervaluing your efforts
- persistent criticism
- setting deadlines or objectives that are impossible to achieve
- moving the goal posts
- withholding information and blaming you for being ignorant
- spreading malicious, unfounded rumours
- ignoring, excluding and isolating you
- making threats
- removing areas of responsibility for no real reason
- giving you menial or trivial tasks
- stealing your ideas and taking credit for your achievements
- giving you too little or too much work
- blocking promotion
- refusing reasonable requests for holidays or for training
- constantly overruling your authority
- monitoring everything you do
- blaming you whenever things go wrong.

A bully will usually combine various types of behaviour. Over time, being on the receiving end of these tactics can amount to torture, making grown men and women weep, and fracturing careers. Bullying can sometimes be quite unconscious. The bully may be unaware of his or her own motives and of the full effects of their behaviour, and you may not pinpoint why your morale is so low. But if the bully is aware of causing you offence, he or she may see it as strong management or positive hands-on supervision. If they are constantly and vindictively picking on you, and disguising this from other people, the bullying is deliberate. In the end, whether or not they consciously intended to be hurtful is irrelevant. What counts is whether their behaviour is acceptable by normal standards, and whether it disadvantages you.

Why do people become bullies?

Bullying is a basic human impulse, and can occur whenever people interact in some way. The behaviour crosses gender, age, colour and race. There's no typical bully, and bullying isn't connected to a particular personality type or to fixed ways of behaving at work. Each case of bullying is different, and takes place within a complex web formed by the personalities, the psychology, the organisation and the wider context involved.



There is any number of reasons why people might use bullying at work, but what shows up clearly across a number of studies is that bullies have a great need to control other people, either openly or indirectly. Most bullies are in positions of authority, as managers or supervisors. It may be that they are driven by envy and insecurity about their own competence, and that this emerges in their desire to keep any possible rivals down.

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Bullying is essentially cowardly. The bully hides his or her own inadequacies, while making out that other people are at fault. The bully may see the other person as more capable, successful, popular or attractive than they are. The targets of bullying are usually above-average performers, much more efficient and better at what they do than the bully. This reason stands head and shoulders above all others for why certain people are targeted. Less common reasons include race, gender or disability, being vulnerable, timid or unassertive, or blowing the whistle on unacceptable working practices – including bullying.



How can I know whether I'm being bullied?

Ask yourself the following questions.

- Does the working relationship feel different from any you have previously experienced?
- Are you being 'got at', constantly?
- Is your work being criticised, even though you know that your standards haven't slipped?
- Are you beginning to question whether the mistakes you're supposed to have made really are your fault?

If this is an accurate picture of what is happening to you at work, and it wasn't true before, ask yourself what has changed.

- Do you have a new boss?
- Has the pressure on your current boss increased?
- Have you recently changed jobs?
- Are your objectives always being changed?
- Are you under more personal scrutiny?
- Are you feeling less involved?
- Are you being asked to perform roles outside your job description?



How does it differ from strong management?

Someone who is bossy or domineering is certainly being aggressive, but he or she will take responsibility for their actions and its consequences, in such a way that other people can comfortably deal with its effect. Providing the bossiness does not interfere with anybody else's rights and wellbeing, it's legitimate. But it's rather an ineffective and short-lived use of power.

Although bullying is not the same as strong management, it often spreads downwards from a senior manager taking what they feel is a 'strong line' with employees. All managers have the right to manage, and are given the authority to do so. But they need to ask themselves the following questions:

- Is the criticism constructive or destructive?
- Is the criticism about the mistake, or about the person?
- Is it designed to make the person aware of their error and to get it right in future, or just to humiliate them?

You cross the line between strong management and bullying when there is a purposeful, malicious intent. It happens when hurting an employee or colleague by intimidating, upsetting, embarrassing, humiliating, offending or ultimately destroying them is more important than getting the task done.

Bullying can easily become part of the culture in companies that pride themselves on their strong, robust management. Employees may assume that management allows and even condones such behaviour unless it takes action against it. Certain organisations are more likely to nurture bullying behaviour. These include places that are fiercely competitive, where there's fear of redundancy, where people lack proper training, where there are poor working relationships, where management is authoritarian and where there's little consultation and no accepted codes of conduct.

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What is harassment?

To all intents and purposes, bullying and harassment are the same things, because harassment means continuously troubling or annoying someone. However, we tend to attach the word harassment to conduct that focuses on particular aspects of a person – their state of mental health, for instance, or their race, colour, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, physical health, disability, impairment, beliefs or age.

In particularly nasty forms, this type of harassment can take the form of physical contact, obscene remarks and gestures, gossip, pressure to provide sexual favours, intrusion by pestering, spying and stalking, or even physical attacks.



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.

Bullying brings unimagined misery, with consequences that may be tragic. There are documented cases of people's physical health being damaged, and many more cases involving psychological distress, breakdown of mental health, or personality change. And this is in addition to the financial problems people may have to face and the disruption to their career. Bullying can also devastate family life. Relationships deteriorate, children get less attention, and divorce rates increase.

Bullying can provoke the following symptoms:

- backache
- severe headaches
- sleeplessness
- feeling sick
- sweating and shaking
- palpitations
- excessive thirst
- constant tiredness
- skin complaints
- loss of appetite
- stomach problems
- acute anxiety
- panic attacks
- irritability
- mood swings
- tearfulness
- loss of interest in sex
- loss of self-esteem
- lack of motivation
- obsessiveness and withdrawal
- depression
- suicidal thoughts.

Persistent, unpredictable bullying creates such fear that individuals frequently make up reasons for staying away from work. They can also develop feelings of paranoia, believing that if they tell tales, the bully will pursue them. If no one officially acknowledges what they are going through, most people being bullied will admit to having murderous feelings towards the person who is making their lives a misery. Targets of bullying devote a great deal of time to imagining how they might get rid of their tormentor. Such fantasies are common, and provide an outlet. But, unfortunately, the aggression can turn inwards, and may result in attempted suicide.

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What can I do about being bullied?

Bullying managers control others by both threatening staff and carrying out their threats. Their leadership is based on 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 might come down to your word against theirs. You may worry that the bully will hit back.

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.



What kind of action should I take?

Well-meaning people may advise you to confront the bully. Unfortunately, this is more likely to enrage than to 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 personnel, health, safety and welfare officers, or your union representative. 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.

Try not to become isolated; seek support from friends and colleagues, as well as from those in authority. Remember you are in a position of power because of your ability or popularity.

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 well be nervous of putting themselves in the line of fire.

Keep a record of the incidents, and any relevant documents, such as emails, memos and faxes, you may have received. 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.

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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.

If you wish to pursue a legal claim against your employer for constructive or unfair dismissal, or a personal injury claim, seek advice from your union in the first instance. If your case is a well-founded, they will take it up on your behalf. You could also consult one of the organisations listed opposite, for support.



What can I do to improve the way I feel?

You are the most important person in all of this, so look after yourself. Practising some basic self-assertiveness skills can help you to feel better about yourself, and you may find classes available locally.

Another way of helping yourself is to set about counteracting the effects of the bullying. Counselling can be very helpful in these circumstances. (For more information, see the books and booklets listed under *Further reading*, on p. 14.)

References

Destructive conflict and bullying at work C. L. Cooper, H. Hote (British Occupational Health Research 2000)

Useful organisations

Mind

Mind is the leading mental health organisation in England and Wales, providing a unique range of services through its local associations, to enable people with experience of mental distress to have a better quality of life. For more information about any mental health issues, including details of your nearest local Mind association, contact the Mind website: www.mind.org.uk or *MindinfoLine* on 0845 766 0163.

Andrea Adams Trust

Hova House, 1 Hova Villas, East Sussex BN3 3DH
tel. 01273 704 900, web: www.andreaadamstrust.org
Advice lines, publications and services

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

BACP House, 35–37 Albert Street, Rugby CV21 2SG
tel. 0870 443 5252, web: www.bacp.co.uk
See website or send A5 SAE for details of local practitioners

Trades Union Congress (TUC)

Congress House, 23–28 Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3LS
tel. 020 7636 4030, web: www.tuc.org.uk
Know Your Rights hotline: 0870 600 4882
Produces a leaflet on bullying at work

Workplace Bullying

Success Unlimited, PO Box 67, Didcot, Oxfordshire OX11 9YS
tel. 0700 224 4383, web: www.successunlimited.co.uk
Seminars and publications. Information via the website

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Further reading

- The anger control workbook: simple innovative techniques for managing anger and developing healthier ways of relating* M. McKay, P. Rogers (New Harbinger Press 2000) £13.99
- The assertiveness handbook: how to express your ideas and stand up for yourself at work and in relationships* R. J. Paterson (New Harbinger Press 2000) £12.99
- The BMA family doctor guide to stress* (Dorling Kindersley 1999) £4.99
- Confidence works: how to be your own life coach* G. McMahon (Sheldon Press 2001) £7.99
- Conquering fear* D. Rowe (Mind 2003) £1
- Heal the hurt: how to forgive and move on* A. Macaskill (Sheldon Press 2002) £6.99
- How to assert yourself* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope with panic attacks* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to cope with sleep problems* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to deal with anger* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to help someone who is suicidal* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to increase your self-esteem* (Mind 2003) £1
- Managing anger: dealing positively with hurt and frustration* G. Lindenfield (Thorsons 2000) £7.99
- The Mind guide to managing stress* (Mind 2003) £1
- The Mind guide to massage* (Mind 2004) £1
- The Mind guide to relaxation* (Mind 2004) £1
- The Mind guide to surviving working life* (Mind 2003) £1
- The Mind guide to yoga* (Mind 2004) £1
- Overcoming low self-esteem* M. Fennell (Robinson 1999) £7.99
- Relaxation: exercises and inspirations for wellbeing* Dr S. Brewer (DBP 2003) £4.99
- Understanding anxiety* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding depression* (Mind 2004) £1
- Understanding talking treatments* (Mind 2002) £1

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Mind does this by:

- advancing the views, needs and ambitions of people with experience of mental distress
- promoting inclusion through challenging discrimination
- influencing policy through campaigning and education
- inspiring the development of quality services which reflect expressed need and diversity
- achieving equal civil and legal rights through campaigning and education.

The values and principles which underpin Mind's work are:

autonomy, equality, knowledge, participation and respect.

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, MindinfoLine: **0845 766 0163** Monday to Friday 9.15am to 5.15pm. Speech-impaired or Deaf enquirers can contact us on the same number (if you are using BT Textdirect, add the prefix 18001). For interpretation, MindinfoLine has access to 100 languages via Language Line.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 028 9032 8474

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