

What Is Bullying?

Psychological harassment, which can also be called **workplace bullying**, involves hostile and unwelcome words or actions that affect an employee's dignity or integrity, and results in a harmful workplace. A person bullies through direct or indirect comments and behaviours with the intention of attempting to harm a person's psyche, morale, reputation or general well-being.

Any behaviour, even **unintentional** behaviour, that intimidates, isolates, humiliates, threatens or discriminates against a targeted individual or individuals can be interpreted as psychological harassment or bullying.

Some Examples of Psychological Harassment or Bullying Are

- Saying or suggesting that someone is incompetent
- Trying to embarrass, belittle, humiliate or demean someone, especially in front of others
- Using texting, email or other social media (like Facebook) to embarrass, insult, bully or tarnish a co-worker's reputation
- Hazing and initiation practices that are designed to humiliate and embarrass new employees
- Threatening someone with the loss of their job
- Spreading rumours, gossiping
- Isolating a person by leaving them out of activities, projects or communications
- Constant nit-picking and fault-finding that is trivial in nature
- Intimidating a person
- Removing areas of responsibilities without cause; underworking so as to create a feeling of uselessness
- Not giving proper credit for work done by someone
- Blocking applications for training, leave or promotion
- Constantly changing work rules
- Yelling or using profanity, hitting fist on desk
- Establishing impossible deadlines that set the worker up to fail
- Intruding on a person's privacy by pestering, spying or stalking
- Tampering with a person's personal belongings or work equipment
- Belittling a person's opinions
- Misrepresenting or twisting what someone says
- Assigning an unreasonable workload
- Subjecting someone to deadlines and goals that others are not held to
- Disciplining for trivial issues that are not substantiated or investigated
- Repeatedly calling a colleague by an insulting name (or repeatedly using a nickname they find offensive or dislike) to refer to them either behind their back, to their face or both
- Deliberately reprimanding, putting down or insulting a colleague in front of coworkers
- Identifying a colleague's mistake, discussing it in public and overstating their error for the purpose of discrediting them
- Nonverbal bullying such as rolling one's eyes or making rude gestures behind the targeted person's back. The bully might show aggressive posture, clenching their fists or glaring



Who Can Display Bullying Behaviour?

Anyone can display bullying behaviour:

- A supervisor or manager
- A co-worker
- A contractor or client or agent
- Volunteer

Anyone who is doing business with the organization.

Effects of Bullying Behaviour on the Targeted Individual

People who are the targets of bullying behaviour may experience a wide range of physical, emotional and psychological effects. Some of these reactions might be:

- Feeling isolated and alone
- Losing confidence/second guessing yourself
- Feeling anxiety, irritability, mood swings, depression, panic, dreading going to work
- Anger, frustration, helplessness
- Difficulty concentrating, increased mistakes in work, loss of motivation
- Nervousness, burnout, chronic fatigue, memory loss, weight loss
- Musculo-skeletal complaints
- Inability to sleep, loss of appetite, headaches, stomach pains
- Psychological trauma, stress, fatigue, illness, injuries
- Relationship difficulties
- Job loss
- Disabilities
- Thoughts of, or actual suicide

How Does Bullying Behaviour and Harassment Affect the Workplace?

Harassment and bullying can also have a poisoned effect on the workplace as a whole. When a workplace is characterized by bullying, it is by definition a poisoned work environment, a place people will naturally try to avoid or leave, resulting in increased absenteeism and turnover, along with decreased morale. With such a workplace environment, an employer can look forward, in addition to increasingly substantial legal costs, to increased costs for absenteeism and sick time, recruitment and retention, increased use of health care benefits and employee assistance programs, increased risk of accidents and loss of reputation and good will.

It is no longer felt that individuals should learn how to handle bullying on their own, or that enduring bullying can be a character builder. It is now recognized that bullies are toxic individuals who can exact a terrible toll from their targets.

Remember that just because someone doesn't "work" directly with you doesn't mean their behaviour is without potential consequences.

The best way to prevent bullying behaviour is to develop workplace civility policies and communicate them to employees. Such civility codes in many employers' handbooks go beyond the usual anti-harassment factors. Employers would do well to define bullying to their own specifications, in accordance with their corporate and industrial cultures.

The Workplace: Where is it?

The definition of workplace encompasses more than the four walls of a building. Workplace bullying, harassment, discrimination and violence can occur anywhere the business of the company is conducted – this includes places such as social functions, conferences, parking lots, and anywhere outside of the workplace, if the discrimination and harassment has, or could have, workplace repercussions.

What's Not Harassment or Bullying?

It's important to understand that a supervisor or manager who provides professional direction, counsel, discipline or performance reviews as part of their job is **not** considered to be harassing their workers.

Impact of Harassment: Your Responsibilities

Even if a person being harassed does not verbally tell their harasser to stop, they may still express their discomfort or dislike through body language such as turning or walking away from their harasser, frowning, crying or becoming silent or withdrawing from the conversation or the person/group. We all need to be aware of these signs.

Poisoned Workplace



When an employee is being bullied, harassed or threatened and no one takes action to stop the behaviour, there is substantial impact on the entire workplace environment. Stress levels go up, other people feel at risk of being targeted, morale suffers, employees don't feel safe, people start looking for jobs in other organizations, absenteeism increases, and job performance suffers, just to name a few. Most importantly, harassers or bullies are given the clear signal that they may continue their behaviour without fear of repercussion.

Targets of harassment and bullying are often afraid to report their situation because they don't want to rock the boat, or are afraid they won't be believed or taken seriously and might be disliked by their co-workers. They also often believe that they will be labelled as trouble-makers or possibly lose out on promotions or even lose their job.

In reality, all laws that cover harassment and bullying also provide for protection from any form of retaliation, reprisal or threat of reprisal for anyone who brings forward a complaint or is a witness in a complaint process.

What to Do About Bullying Behaviour?

There are a number of options available for employees who believe they are being harassed, are the target of bullying behaviour or even violence, and for employees who have witnessed such behaviours:

- Keep a record of dates, times, details, witnesses, locations of all situations of harassment and bullying
- **Only if you feel safe doing so**, make your concerns known to the harasser (in person, in writing or through a representative) and ask them to stop
- Follow the employer's internal complaint procedures
- Tell your supervisor about the harassment and bullying behaviour, in writing if possible
- Inform your supervisor directly and immediately of a threat or act of violence
- Report the matter to police when you deem it appropriate for your safety and that of your co-workers

What Employers Can Do About Bullying?

Due diligence for employers requires that they:

- Develop unambiguous **anti-bullying**, anti-harassment and anti-violence policies
- Train employees and management in these policies
- Set out a process for investigating complaints that is fair, thorough, unbiased and objective
- Avoid practices, such as routine over-assignment of overtime and extra work, that are a threat to employee's mental health and well-being

A Final Word on Harassment & Bullying in the Workplace

Common Sense

Your employer expects everyone in the organization to contribute to a healthy, safe and respectful workplace by using common sense in all work-related situations. It sounds simple but people don't always think before they speak, consider another person's feelings or count to ten when they feel angry or overwhelmed.

The law says that it's everyone's right to work in an environment free from harassment, bullying and violence. It's also everyone's responsibility to contribute to such an environment.

On average, we spend as much time with our co-workers as we do with our own families during the week, and it's healthy to feel comfortable, accepted and safe within our group. Unfortunately, some people start to feel too comfortable and start behaving in ways that are not appropriate in the workplace.

Harassment and Bullying in the Workplace: Tips and Warning Signs

Here are some simple **TIPS and WARNING SIGNS** to help you determine if your or someone else's behaviour has crossed the line into harassment, bullying or violence.

- If someone asks you to stop a particular behaviour – **STOP!!!**
- If you made someone cry, shake, become obviously uncomfortable, walk away, or show any other signs of objection to what you have said or done, you've crossed the line
- Ask yourself: How would I look if my behaviour was on the evening news?
- Would I behave this way if my partner or spouse was in the same room?
- How would I react if someone behaved this way toward my partner or spouse?
- Would I act this way toward someone who looks up to me like my son, daughter, niece or nephew?
- Does this interaction have mutual respect?
- Am I feeling too emotional? Is my face flushed? Do I feel my blood pressure going up? Are my hands clenched? If you can answer 'yes' to any of these, walk away and take a minute to calm down.

These are just a few ideas, and we encourage you to develop your own ideas on how you can contribute to a respectful, safe and healthy workplace.