

Health Promotion / Wellness / Psychosocial

Bullying in the Workplace

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What is workplace bullying?

Bullying is usually seen as acts or verbal comments that could psychologically or 'mentally' hurt or isolate a person in the workplace. Sometimes, bullying can involve negative physical contact as well. Bullying usually involves repeated incidents or a pattern of behaviour that is intended to intimidate, offend, degrade or humiliate a particular person or group of people. It has also been described as the assertion of power through aggression.

Is bullying a workplace issue?

Yes, bullying is a workplace issue. In Canada, occupational health and safety laws include the concept of [due diligence](#). Due diligence means that employers shall take all reasonable precautions, under the particular circumstances, to prevent injuries or incidents in the workplace. Every person should be able to work in a safe and healthy workplace. The legislation in your jurisdiction will describe the roles and responsibilities for workplace parties with respect to workplace harassment and violence, including developing and implementing policies and programs. Definitions of harassment and violence often formally include bullying, but is implied if not.

Please refer to the following OSH Answers documents for more information:

- [Internet Harassment or Cyberbullying](#)
 - [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace](#)
 - [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Intimate Partner and Family Violence](#)
 - [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Legislation](#)
 - [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Dealing with Negative Interactions](#)
 - [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Parking Lot Safety](#)
 - [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Warning Signs](#)
 - [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Working Late](#)
 - [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Gender-Based Violence](#)
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What are examples of bullying?

While bullying is a form of aggression, the actions can be both obvious and subtle. It is important to note that the following is not a checklist, nor does it mention all forms of bullying. There is no way to predict who may be the bully or the target.

This list is included to show some ways bullying may occur in a workplace. Also, remember that bullying is usually considered to be a pattern of behaviour where one or more incidents will help show that bullying is taking place, but it may be one incident, especially one with a lasting effect.

Examples include:

- Spreading malicious rumours, gossip, or innuendo.
- Excluding or isolating someone socially.
- Intimidating a person.
- Undermining or deliberately impeding a person's work.
- Physically abusing or threatening abuse.
- Removing areas of responsibility without cause.
- Constantly changing work guidelines.
- Establishing impossible deadlines that will set up the individual to fail.
- Withholding necessary information or purposefully giving the wrong information.
- Making jokes that are 'obviously offensive' by spoken word or e-mail.
- Intruding on a person's privacy by pestering, spying or stalking.

- Assigning unreasonable duties or workload which are unfavourable to one person (in a way that creates unnecessary pressure).
- Underwork – creating a feeling of uselessness.
- Yelling or using profanity.
- Criticizing a person persistently or constantly.
- Belittling a person's opinions.
- Unwarranted (or undeserved) punishment.
- Blocking applications for training, leave, or promotion.
- Tampering with a person's personal belongings or work equipment.

If you are not sure an action or statement could be considered bullying, you can use the "reasonable person" test. Would most people consider the action unacceptable?

What might not be considered bullying?

It is sometimes hard to know if bullying is happening at the workplace. Bullying can be very subtle and may be more obvious once a pattern of behaviour is established.

Also, many studies acknowledge that there is a "fine line" between strong management and bullying. Comments that are objective and are intended to provide constructive feedback are not usually considered bullying, but rather are intended to assist the worker with their work.

As described by WorkSafeBC, bullying and harassing behaviour does not include:

- Expressing differences of opinion.
- Offering constructive feedback, guidance, or advice about work-related behaviour.
- Reasonable action taken by an employer or supervisor relating to the management and direction of workers or the place of employment (e.g., managing a worker's performance, taking reasonable disciplinary actions, assigning work).

Prince Edward Island's Workers Compensation Board also adds that when done reasonably and fairly, the following actions are generally not considered workplace bullying or harassment:

- with good reason, changing work assignments and job duties;
- scheduling and workloads;
- inspecting the workplace;
- implementing health and safety measures;

- delivering work instructions;
 - assessing and evaluating work performance;
 - disciplinary actions; and/or
 - any other reasonable and lawful exercise of a management function.
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How can bullying affect an individual?

People who are the targets of bullying may experience a range of effects. These reactions include:

- Shock.
 - Anger.
 - Feelings of frustration or helplessness.
 - Increased sense of vulnerability.
 - Loss of confidence.
 - Physical symptoms such as:
 - Inability to sleep.
 - Loss of appetite.
 - Psychosomatic symptoms such as:
 - Stomach pains.
 - Headaches.
 - Panic or anxiety, especially about going to work.
 - Family tension and stress.
 - Inability to concentrate.
 - Low morale and productivity.
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How can bullying affect the workplace?

Bullying affects the overall "health" of an organization. An "unhealthy" workplace can have many effects. In general, these effects include:

- Increased absenteeism.
- Increased turnover.

- Increased stress.
 - Increased costs for employee assistance programs (EAPs), recruitment, etc.
 - Increased risk for incidents.
 - Decreased productivity and motivation.
 - Decreased morale.
 - Reduced corporate image and customer confidence.
 - Poor customer service.
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Are there any laws addressing bullying in the workplace in Canada?

- Many jurisdictions have defined bullying separately or have included bullying as part of the definition of behaviours associated with harassment or violence. For example, Prince Edward Island has defined harassment in their Workplace Harassment Regulations as:

(b) "harassment" means any inappropriate conduct, comment, display, action or gesture or any bullying that the person responsible for the conduct, comment, display, action or gesture or the bullying knows, or ought reasonably to know, could have a harmful effect on a worker's psychological or physical health or safety, and includes

(i) conduct that is based on any personal characteristic such as, but not limited to, race, creed, religion, colour, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, family status, disability, physical size or weight, age, nationality, ancestry or place of origin, gender identity or pregnancy, and

(ii) inappropriate sexual conduct that is known, or ought reasonably to be known, to the person responsible for the conduct to be unwelcome, including, but not limited to, sexual solicitations or advances, sexually suggestive remarks, jokes or gestures, circulating or sharing inappropriate images, or unwanted physical contact.

Other resources include in British Columbia, WorkSafeBC has developed policies and [resources](#) related specifically to workplace bullying and harassment and the Ontario Government has published [Understand the law on workplace violence and harassment](#).

If there is no legislation which specifically addresses bullying, the general duty clause to provide a safe and healthy workplace establishes the duty of employers to protect workers from risks at work. These risks can include harm from both physical and psychological health aspects.

In addition, federal, provincial and territorial human rights laws prohibit harassment related to race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, marital status, family status, disability, pardoned conviction, or sexual orientation. In certain situations, these laws may apply to bullying.

What can you do if you think you are being bullied?

If you feel that you are being bullied, discriminated against, victimized or subjected to any form of harassment:

DO

- Firmly tell the person that his or her behaviour is not acceptable and ask them to stop. You can ask a person you trust, such as supervisor or union member to be with you when you approach the person.
- Keep a factual journal or diary of events. Record:
 - The date, time and what happened in as much detail as possible.
 - The names of witnesses.
 - The outcome of the event.

Remember, it is not just the character of the incidents, but the intent of the behaviour and the number, frequency, and especially the pattern that can reveal the bullying or harassment.

- Keep copies of any letters, memos, e-mails, etc., received from the person.
- Know your organization's violence prevention and harassment policies and follow the procedures outlined in those documents.
- Report the bullying or harassment to the person identified in your workplace policy, your supervisor, or a delegated manager. If your concerns are minimized, proceed to the next level of management.
- Build a support network – family, friends, supportive coworkers, support organizations, and information centres.
- Take advantage of your workplace's employee assistance program.
- Understand that if you begin to question your own competence, the problem may not be you.

If your health is affected, keep a detailed record of:

- All physical and mental symptoms
- All visits to your doctor or any other medical or psychological appointments
- Any medication or treatment prescribed

DO NOT

- Do not retaliate. You may end up looking like the perpetrator, and these actions will most certainly cause confusion for those responsible for evaluating and responding to the situation.
- Do not blame yourself. Don't waste time or energy worrying.
- Do not engage in workplace conversations that make you uncomfortable. Excuse yourself and walk away. If necessary, say "I'm not comfortable discussing this."
- Do not agree or disagree with distorted statements.

What should I do if they witness bullying, harassment or violence?

If you witness harassment, bullying, or mobbing:

- Make sure the victim knows about your workplace violence prevention policy.
 - Stand next to, or speak up for, the person being harassed, bullied, or mobbed.
 - Ask the harasser or bully to stop.
 - Offer support.
 - File an incident report with your employer or the person designated in your workplace violence prevention program.
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What can an employer do?

The most important component of any workplace prevention program is management commitment. Management commitment is best communicated in a written policy. Since bullying is a form of violence and harassment in the workplace, employers may wish to write a comprehensive policy that covers a range of incidents (from bullying and harassment to physical violence).

A workplace violence and harassment prevention program should:

- Be developed by management and worker representatives.
- Apply to management, workers, clients, independent contractors and anyone who has a relationship with your company.
- Define what you mean by workplace bullying (and harassment and violence) in precise, concrete language.
- Provide clear examples of unacceptable behaviour and working conditions.
- State in clear terms your organization's view toward workplace bullying and its commitment to the prevention of workplace bullying.
- Precisely state the consequences of making threats or committing acts.
- Outline the process by which preventive measures will be developed and implemented.
- Encourage reporting of all incidents of bullying or other forms of workplace harassment and violence.

- Outline the confidential process by which workers, including witnesses, can report incidents and to whom.
- Assure no reprisals will be made against workers who choose to report their experiences.
- Outline the procedures for investigating and resolving complaints.
- Maintain confidentiality during the resolution process.
- Describe how information about potential risks of bullying and violence will be communicated to workers.
- Make a commitment to provide support services to victims.
- Offer a confidential Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to allow workers to seek help.
- Make a commitment to fulfill the prevention training needs of different levels of personnel within the organization.
- Make a commitment to monitor and regularly review the policy.
- State applicable regulatory requirements, where possible.

(Adapted from: [Preventing Harassment and Violence in the Workplace Guide](#). CCOHS)

What are some general tips for the workplace?

DO

- Encourage everyone at the workplace to act towards others in a respectful and professional manner.
- Have a workplace policy in place that includes a reporting system.
- Educate everyone that bullying is a serious matter.
- Try to work out solutions before the situation gets serious or "out of control".
- Educate everyone about what is considered bullying, and whom they can go to for help.
- Treat all reports seriously, and deal with reports promptly and confidentially.
- Train supervisors and managers in how to deal with complaints and potential situations. Encourage them to address situations promptly, whether or not a formal report has been filed.
- Have an impartial third party help with the resolution, if necessary.

DO NOT

- Do not ignore any potential issues.

- Do not delay resolution. Act as soon as possible.
 - (Adapted from: [Comprehensive Workplace Health Program Guide](#). CCOHS)
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