

Workplace bullying: your guide

Workplace bullying can have a huge impact on not just employees, but on organisations as a whole. And while everyone has the right to work in a safe and supportive environment, workplace bullying is still a common issue.

But what exactly is workplace bullying? And what should you do if you're affected? Here's everything you need to know about understanding and overcoming bullying in your workplace.

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What is workplace bullying?

What exactly constitutes workplace bullying? [Safe Work Australia](#)'s definition describes it as repeated and unreasonable behaviour that is directed towards a specific individual or group, that poses a risk to their health and safety. This risk to health and safety refers to both mental and physical health.

Bullying in the workplace can come from:

- Colleagues, known as sideways bullying
- Supervisors or managers to their team members, known as downward bullying
- Workers to their supervisor or manager, known as upward bullying

Workplace bullying can involve a range of communication channels, like email, instant messaging, text messages and social media. In some cases, it can even happen outside the workplace. Examples of workplace bullying include:

- Using derogatory, abusive or insulting language, or making offensive comments
- Undermining or belittling someone's work or ideas
- Intentionally excluding an individual from work-related events and activities
- Spreading false rumours or gossiping about a coworker
- Setting unrealistic workloads or unattainable expectations
- Intimidating language or gestures
- Making belittling or humiliating comments
- Withholding crucial information that will impact an individual's ability to perform their job
- Changing work schedules, rosters and leave to deliberately inconvenience a particular worker or workers

If bullying behaviour relates to sex, age, disability or race, it could be a breach of **anti-discrimination laws**.

What isn't workplace bullying?

Workplace bullying doesn't include legitimate disciplinary actions or the management of poor performance. When disciplinary or performance-management actions are carried out fairly and in a reasonable manner, it isn't considered bullying. This includes:

- Giving constructive **feedback**
- Disciplinary action for inappropriate behaviour
- Implementing a performance management plan when performance declines
- Redundancy
- Deciding not to award an opportunity or promotion, based on a lack of performance

Types of bullying in the workplace

Workplace bullying can take different forms. Below we outline some types of bullying that can happen in the workplace.

Physical abuse

- Hitting, kicking, scratching, pushing or spitting
- Throwing objects with the aim to hurt someone
- Using weapons to cause physical harm
- Threatening body language
- Stalking

Verbal abuse

- Insults, slurs and offensive comments
- Yelling and screaming at an individual
- Unfair criticism, especially when used as a humiliation tactic
- Unwarranted threats of disciplinary action or dismissal
- Inappropriate comments including sexual harassment or discrimination

Cyber bullying

- Sending emails or messages that are threatening or insulting
- Publicly posting images or messages to humiliate another person
- Excluding someone from emails or important messages

Bullying in management

- Micro-managing an individual
- Creating an unfair workload, whether too much work or not enough
- Withholding information or training resources that an individual needs to succeed in their role
- Unreasonable criticism of someone's work

Covert or indirect bullying

- Spreading rumours or gossiping
- Lying to damage someone's reputation
- Using mimicking gestures or facial gestures to poke fun at someone
- Influencing other coworkers' opinions to single out an individual

The impact of bullying and harassment in the workplace

Workplace bullying can have a serious impact on the health and safety of the person experiencing bullying. It can also impact coworkers and people who witness the bullying. While the effects vary depending on the situation, here are some common

impacts of bullying on the individual:

- **Emotional distress:** anxiety, stress, panic attacks and issues sleeping are all common symptoms of bullying.
- **Physical health issues:** bullying can also lead to physical issues like headaches, fatigue, digestive issues and tense muscles.
- **Low self-esteem:** continuous bullying can harm an individual's self-esteem, leading to feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy.
- **Decrease in performance:** bullying can impact a worker's ability to concentrate and perform their responsibilities.
- **Deteriorating relationships:** bullying can put strain on relationships in and out of the workplace, especially if the individual becomes isolated and withdrawn.
- **Job dissatisfaction:** an individual who is bullied often feels unhappy in their workplace.
- **Negative impact on career:** a person's career can begin to be affected by continued bullying, hindering their advancement and opportunities
- **Burn out:** workplace bullying can also be a contributing factor of [professional burnout](#). Defined as feeling chronic physical and emotional exhaustion, burn out is often accompanied by feelings of cynicism and detachment from work. It impacts both the person and the organisation they work for.
- **Negative workplace culture:** due to the stress workplace bullying often causes, it can impact mental health and have a knock-on effect on the organisation's [workplace culture](#).

How to stop workplace bullying

It can be hard to know how to stop workplace bullying. One thing you can do is address bullying behaviours as soon as you notice them. This could mean speaking up in the moment to a bully or reporting the behaviour to your manager or a trusted person within the business.

If you're experiencing workplace bullying yourself, here are a few steps you can take:

1. Check to see if your workplace has a policy on bullying and harassment.
2. Take notes or keep written records of the events, including when they happened and if anyone else was present.
3. Report the behaviour to your supervisor, manager or HR officer. Alternatively, if your workplace policy has a specific procedure, do your best to follow the steps outlined.
4. If the bullying involves physical assault, stalking or is a criminal offence, report it to the police.

5. Speak with a health professional or contact your employee assistance program (EAP) for mental health support.

There are different ways you can effectively address workplace bullying, depending on your level of authority at work. Let's take a closer look.

Combating workplace bullying as a leader

It's important to lead by example, or better yet, take a proactive approach to combating workplace bullying. It's essential to foster a culture of respect within the company. This can be done through the introduction of anti-bullying policies and procedures. If you receive a complaint, be sure to address it immediately and offer training to your team on how to deal with workplace bullying.

Combating workplace bullying as a team member

It's important to call out bullying or harassment as it happens, if you feel comfortable doing so. You can also offer your support if the victim of the bullying decides to make a formal complaint. Write down details of the incident as soon as you can. Reflect on your actions to understand if there was anything you could have done differently yourself.

What legislation covers bullying in the workplace?

In Australia, all businesses, companies and organisations are obligated to ensure their employees aren't exposed to health and safety risks in the workplace. This includes taking steps to minimise bullying and harassment.

As a first step, businesses should have a clear and accessible bullying and harassment policy. Many companies also provide bullying and harassment training to help employees understand what they should do in the event of workplace bullying.

When it comes to legislation, the Fair Work Act protects all employees against bullying, harassment and discrimination. Each state and territory has its own set of workplace bullying laws that can be found on the [Safe Work Australia website](#).

If you've experienced bullying and your employer hasn't addresses your concern, you can apply to the Fair Work Commission for an [order to stop the bullying](#).

What to do if you are bullied at work

If you're experiencing bullying in the workplace, there are three important steps you should follow.

Step 1. Report it

Report the behaviour as soon as it happens. Contact your supervisor or human resources manager to alert them to the incident. If you don't feel comfortable talking about it in person, you can submit a workplace bullying complaint letter instead.

Step 2. Document the incident

It's important to document all bullying incidents, even if you just jot down a few notes. Include details of the event, such as when it happened and the names of any potential witnesses.

Step 3. Seek a solution

Working towards a solution can help you overcome the incident and move forward. If you feel comfortable, you might want to approach the bully yourself. In some cases, they might not be aware of their behaviour. Alternatively, you can arrange a meeting with your HR department. If you've experienced severe workplace bullying or harassment, it could be worth seeking a professional for support.

Workplace bullying can come in a variety of different forms and through a number of channels, both inside and outside of the workplace. Whether you're experiencing bullying yourself or have witnessed it happen to someone else, it's important to speak up and take action. Everyone in the workplace has the responsibility to maintain a fair and safe workplace.

FAQs

What should I do if I witness workplace bullying?

If you witness someone being bullied in the workplace, call out the behaviour when it happens, if it feels safe to do so. Otherwise, record the details of what happened, report the behaviour to the appropriate person and talk to the person that was targeted. Check

that they're okay, explain what their options are in terms of reporting the behaviour, and encourage them to seek support.

How can I rebuild my confidence and mental well-being after experiencing workplace bullying?

Workplace bullying can take a big toll on your mental health, but there are steps you can take to rebuild your confidence. Aside from using your work's employee assistance program for free and confidential counselling, you may want to speak to a mental-health professional.

Can workplace bullying occur in remote or virtual work settings?

Bullying and harassment can happen even in a remote or [virtual setting](#) via:

- Email
- Video calls
- Instant messaging platforms
- Social media

With this in mind, it's important for workplaces, whether on-site or remote, to foster a respectful workplace culture and establish a zero-tolerance policy for bullying.