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# Bullying in the Workplace

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## What is workplace bullying?

Bullying is usually seen as acts or verbal comments that could '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. However, it is sometimes hard to know if bullying is happening at the workplace. 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 employee 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).

There is no way to predict who may be the bully or the target.

## 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. This list is included as a way of showing some of the ways bullying may happen 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.

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 responsibilities 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.
- Criticising 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?

## 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 and/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.

## How can bullying affect the workplace?

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

- Increased absenteeism.
- Increased turnover.
- Increased stress.
- Increased costs for employee assistance programs (EAPs), recruitment, etc.
- Increased risk for accidents / incidents.
- Decreased productivity and motivation.
- Decreased morale.
- Reduced corporate image and customer confidence.
- Poor customer service.

## Are there any laws addressing bullying in the workplace in Canada?

To date, few Canadian jurisdictions have occupational health and safety legislation that is specific to bullying.

In British Columbia, WorkSafeBC has developed policies and [resources](https://www.worksafebc.com/en/health-safety/hazards-exposures/bullying-harassment/resource-tool-kit) (<https://www.worksafebc.com/en/health-safety/hazards-exposures/bullying-harassment/resource-tool-kit>) related specifically to workplace bullying and harassment. Treasury Board of Canada has published "[People to People Communication – Preventing and Resolving Harassment for a Healthy Workplace](http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/psm-fpm/healthy-sain/prh/ppc-ff/ppc-fftb-eng.asp)" (<http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/psm-fpm/healthy-sain/prh/ppc-ff/ppc-fftb-eng.asp>).

However, almost all jurisdictions have legislation specific to workplace violence and/or harassment. A list of which acts and regulations that cover [violence/harassment](http://ccinfoweb2.ccohs.ca/legislation/documents/notes/oshleg/leg_viol.htm) ([http://ccinfoweb2.ccohs.ca/legislation/documents/notes/oshleg/leg\\_viol.htm](http://ccinfoweb2.ccohs.ca/legislation/documents/notes/oshleg/leg_viol.htm)) is available on our website. Please note that while you can see the list of legislation for free, you will need a subscription to view the actual documentation.

Where there is no legislation which specifically addressed bullying, the general duty clause establishes the duty of employers to protect employees from risks at work. These risks can include harm from both physical and mental health aspects.

In addition, federal and provincial human right 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 supervisor or union member to be with you when you approach the person.
- **KEEP** a factual journal or diary of daily 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 number, frequency, and especially the pattern that can reveal the bullying or harassment.

- KEEP copies of any letters, memos, e-mails, faxes, etc., received from the person.
- REPORT the 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.

#### DO NOT

- DO NOT RETALIATE. You may end up looking like the perpetrator and will most certainly cause confusion for those responsible for evaluating and responding to the situation.

(Adapted from: Violence in the Workplace Prevention Guide  
(<http://www.ccohs.ca/products/publications/violence.html>). CCOHS)

## 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 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 prevention program must:

- Be developed by management and employee representatives.
- Apply to management, employee's, clients, independent contractors and anyone who has a relationship with your company.
- Define what you mean by workplace bullying (or harassment or 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.
- Encourage reporting of all incidents of bullying or other forms of workplace violence.
- Outline the confidential process by which employees can report incidents and to whom.
- Assure no reprisals will be made against reporting employees.

- Outline the procedures for investigating and resolving complaints.
- Describe how information about potential risks of bullying/violence will be communicated to employees.
- Make a commitment to provide support services to victims.
- Offer a confidential Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to allow employees with personal problems 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: Violence in the Workplace Prevention Guide  
(<http://www.ccohs.ca/products/publications/violence.html>). 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 complaints seriously, and deal with complaints 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 complaint has been filed.
- HAVE an impartial third party help with the resolution, if necessary.

### DO NOT

- DO NOT IGNORE any potential problems.
- DO NOT DELAY resolution. Act as soon as possible.

(Adapted from: Workplace Health and Wellness Guide  
(<http://www.ccohs.ca/products/publications/wellness.html>). CCOHS)

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## Related Products and Services

You may also be interested in the following related products and services from CCOHS:

### Courses

[Violence in the Workplace: Awareness](http://www.ccohs.ca/products/courses/violence_awareness/)

([http://www.ccohs.ca/products/courses/violence\\_awareness/](http://www.ccohs.ca/products/courses/violence_awareness/))

[Violence in the Workplace: Establish a Prevention Program](http://www.ccohs.ca/products/courses/prevent_violence/)

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[Violence in the Workplace: Recognize the Risk & Take Action](http://www.ccohs.ca/products/courses/recognize_violence/)

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**Dealing with a Hostage Situation**

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([http://www.ccohs.ca/products/courses/mh\\_series/](http://www.ccohs.ca/products/courses/mh_series/))

**Publications****Violence in the Workplace Prevention Guide**

(<http://www.ccohs.ca/products/publications/violence.html>)

**Posters****Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace Infographic**

(<http://www.ccohs.ca/products/posters/bullying-harassment/>)

**Bullying is Not Part of the Job** (<http://ccohs.ca/products/posters/bullying.html>)

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