

Workplace Bullying

Not all workplace hazards come from machines or dangerous substances. In some circumstances, the very people we work with can cause harm and make us ill. When we are subjected repeatedly to treatment or behaviours that are intended to humiliate, demoralize or undermine our credibility - we are being bullied.

Bullying behaviours

Bullying can include spreading malicious gossip or lies; excluding or ignoring someone socially; intimidating; physically abusing or threatening abuse; yelling or using profanity; making jokes that are obviously offensive; establishing impossible deadlines; assigning unrealistic workloads, undermining or deliberately impeding a person's work; and criticizing habits, attitudes or private life. These are just a few examples and not by any means a complete list.

How is bullying harmful?

Bullying is becoming more widely recognized as a serious workplace problem that can cause undue stress among workers. Bullying does more than hurt someone's feelings. A recent American survey on workplace bullying, conducted in 2007 by the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI) found that bullying caused stress-related health problems in 45% of people who were bullied. Overall 37% of American workers had been bullied at work.

The study also found that 77% of victims eventually lose their jobs. 40% of the participants who said the bullying eventually stopped, reported that they had made it stop by voluntarily leaving the company.

A host of health problems have been associated with workplace bullying. These include stress-related conditions such as high blood pressure, anxiety, panic attacks, depression and post-traumatic stress syndrome.

The workplace suffers, too. Bullying affects the overall health of an organization and can cause an increase in stress-related absenteeism and turnover. With the loss of employees comes a loss of accumulated wisdom and experience as well as higher costs for employee assistance programs (EAPs) and recruitment. When morale is down, employees are less productive and the company is less profitable.

Who are these bullies?

Bullies can be anyone in your workplace. However according to the WBI study, 72% of the bullies were bosses. The most frequently bullied targets were non-supervisory employees, and women (in 57% of cases).

What can be done about it?

Victims of bullying should act quickly by firmly telling the person that the behaviour is unacceptable and asking for it to stop. It would also be wise to ask a trusted supervisor, manager and/or union member to be present. The bullied person should document

everything by keeping a journal of daily occurrences and any letters, memos, e-mails and other correspondence from the bully. This information is important because bullying is characterized not only by the nature of incidents, but by the number, frequency and pattern of the behaviour.

If you are being bullied, do not retaliate. It's important to make it clear who is the perpetrator (not you!). Make sure to report the harassment to the appropriate manager or supervisor or, if necessary, to the next level of management and your shop steward/union representative.

Under all occupational health and safety law, employers have a general duty to protect employees from hazards that affect their physical safety or mental health. In addition, some jurisdictions have specific regulations that may apply to situations of workplace bullying (e.g. Quebec, Saskatchewan and Manitoba). Management's commitment is best communicated in a written policy. Since bullying is a form of violence in the workplace, employers should write a comprehensive policy that covers a range of incidents (from bullying and harassment to physical violence).

General tips for the workplace

- Encourage everyone at the workplace to treat one another in a respectful and professional manner.
- Have a workplace policy in place that includes a reporting system.
- Treat all complaints seriously. Try to resolve situations before they get serious or out of control.
- Educate everyone that bullying is a serious matter; what is considered bullying, and whom they can go to for help.
- Train supervisors and managers in how to deal with complaints and potential situations. Encourage them to address situations promptly and confidentially whether or not a formal complaint has been filed.
- Have an impartial third party help with the resolution, if necessary.

Source: CCOHS