

Learning Package Two

Bullying Behaviour in the Workplace

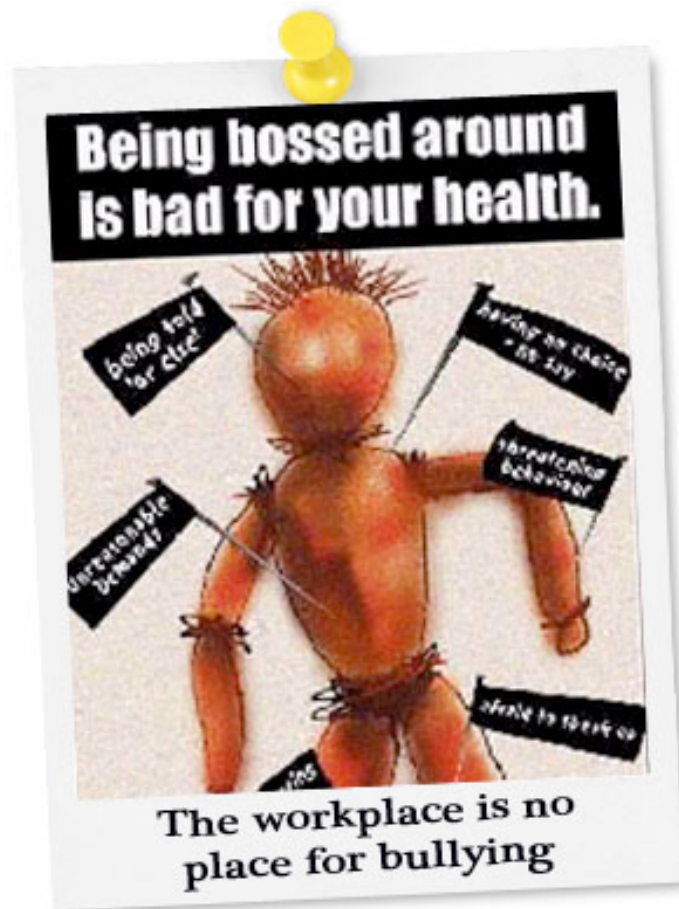


Image found at - <http://www.worksite.actu.org.au/fact-sheets/safety---workplace-bullying.aspx>

In this module we will discuss the damaging aspects of Bullying Behaviour and consider means to address this noxious behaviour if and when it is encountered. Unlike conflict which can be a strengthening process when handled in an appropriate manner, bullying is always harmful and causes distress. The module covers the following material

- What is bullying behaviour
- Features of bullying behaviour in the workplace
- The effects of bullying behaviour
- Costs of workplace bullying
- Dealing with bullying in the workplace
- Getting help

What is Bullying Behaviour?

The Australian Human Rights Commission considers Bullying Behaviour as when people repeatedly and intentionally use words or actions against someone or a group of people to cause distress and risk to their wellbeing. These actions are usually done by people who have more influence or power over someone else, or who want to make someone else feel less powerful or helpless (in other words, when there is a power imbalance).

Bullying is not the same as conflict between people (like having a fight) or disliking someone, even though people might bully each other because of conflict or dislike.

More information can be found at the Commission's website: [See here.](#)

Bullying behaviour is always noxious, destructive and unwelcome in any workplace. There is no place in any respectful or healthy organisation for bullying behaviour.

Everyone has the right to work in an environment free from bullying, harassment, discrimination and violence. Under Occupational Health and Safety legislation, employers and employees have a legal responsibility to comply with any measures that promote health and safety in the workplace. Because of this duty, employers need to eliminate or reduce the risks to employees' health and safety caused by workplace bullying.

Features of Bullying Behaviour in the Workplace

Bullying behaviour can range from very obvious verbal or physical assault to very subtle psychological abuse. This behaviour may include:

- Physical or verbal abuse
- Yelling, screaming or offensive language
- Excluding or isolating employees
- Psychological harassment
- Intimidation
- Assigning meaningless tasks unrelated to the job
- Giving employees impossible jobs
- Deliberately changed work rosters to inconvenience particular employees
- Undermining work performance by deliberately withholding information vital for effective work performance
- Keeping someone out of a group (online or offline)
- Acting in an unpleasant way near or towards someone
- Giving nasty looks, making rude gestures, calling names, being rude and impolite, and constantly negative teasing.
- Spreading rumours or lies, or misrepresenting someone (i.e. using their Facebook account to post messages as if it were them).

There are three main types of Bullying.

Face-to-face bullying (sometimes referred to as direct bullying) involves physical actions such as punching or kicking or direct verbal actions such as name-calling and insulting.

Covert bullying (sometimes referred to as indirect bullying) is less direct, but just as painful. It means bullying which isn't easily seen by others and is conducted out of sight, such as excluding people from groups or spreading lies or rumours. Because it is less obvious, it is often unacknowledged by adults.

Cyber bullying occurs through the use of information or communication technologies such as Instant Messaging or chat, text messages, email and social networking sites or forums. It has many similarities with offline bullying, but it can also be anonymous, it can reach a wide audience, and sent or uploaded material can be difficult to remove. Most people who cyber bully also bully off-line.

The Effects of Bullying Behaviour

If you are being bullied at work you might:

- Find your promotional opportunities are limited and be less successful in your work
- Be less confident in your work
- Feel scared, stressed, anxious or depressed
- Find your private and social life is affected
- Be absent from work more often
- Feel like you can't trust your employer or the people who you work with
- Have physical signs of stress like headaches, backaches, sleep problems, or impaired concentration.

The Costs of Bullying in the Workplace

There is a range of psychological and physical illnesses and injuries that can be caused by exposure to bullying in the workplace, including anxiety disorders, stress, depression and sleep disturbances.

Using international and reputable research, The **Beyond Bullying Association**, estimates that between 400,000 and two million Australians will be harassed at work (in 2001), while 2.5 to 5 million will experience workplace harassment at some time during their career.

Citing slightly different (but equally serious damaging effects) in 2005 WorkCover (Victoria) estimated the dollar 'cost' of workplace bullying saying, "The financial cost of workplace bullying to business in Australia is estimated to be between \$6 billion and \$13 billion a year." This includes indirect costs, such as absenteeism, labour turnover, loss of productivity and legal costs.

Workplace bullying has serious economic impacts on Australian businesses. The Australian Human Rights Commission cites a recent impact and cost assessment which calculated that workplace bullying costs Australian employers between \$6 - \$36 billion dollars every year when hidden and lost opportunity costs are considered.

Specific symptoms of long term bullying in a workplace or school can include decreased productivity, increased staff absenteeism, staff turnover and poor morale. Financial costs can include legal and workers' compensation and management time in addressing cases of workplace bullying.

Dealing with Bullying Behaviour

It is in everyone's interest to ensure that workplaces are free from damaging and costly behaviour such as bullying.

- Strategies to deal with bullying include:
- Confronting the issues with the perpetrators in a firm but polite manner
- Identifying the problem behaviour/s in clear terms
- Enlisting support from trusted colleagues or managers. They will give you much needed support and will often have suggestions you hadn't considered for helping with the situation.
- If you feel safe and confident, you should approach the person who is bullying you and tell them that their behaviour is unwanted and not acceptable.
- You might feel more comfortable taking a friend with you to talk to the bully or when seeking help. If you feel you might get too nervous to speak, write down what you'd like to say on paper or in an email.
- If direct measures are not successful, consider a formal workplace grievance. The process will differ according to your workplace and your state or territory. Contact the Human Rights Commission for directions on lodging a complaint or for more avenues to address a complaint. Their site can be found at www.hreoc.gov.au or they can be contacted according to the information below.

Getting Help

Most agencies or workplaces will have a grievance or complaint mechanism which can be used to formally address complaints of bullying or harassment. Natural justice dictates that such complaints are in writing before any formal investigation can occur. It is advisable to seek the support of a manager or colleague to address the issue and provide advice about the grievance procedure. Whether the on-site manager or colleague is consulted is a decision which can only be made by the aggrieved party/ies. If the manager is the source of the bullying, then it is necessary to address a complaint to other personnel.

The **Australian Human Rights Commission** (telephone 1300 656 419) has a complaint handling service that can investigate and resolve complaints of discrimination, harassment and bullying that are covered by federal discrimination law (that is, complaints about race,

sex, disability or age discrimination).

http://www.humanrights.gov.au/complaints_information/index.html

Alternatively you may wish to lodge a complaint with your state or territory's Anti-discrimination agency. For a list of the relevant agencies see

http://www.hreoc.gov.au/info_for_employers/law/index.html.

Some types of workplace bullying are criminal offences. If you have experienced violence, assault or stalking you can [report it directly to the police](#).

Exercise Two

Although Bullying Behaviour shares some features with Conflict in the workplace, there are significant differences between the two processes.

Thinking about the times you have witnessed both conflict and bullying in the work context, are you able to identify those features they share and those which are different?

What effects did each of these behaviour sets have on those people directly involved?

Were there people indirectly involved who experienced negative effects in each situation, and if so, how did they differ?