

BEWARE bullying at work

Bullying at work is a widespread problem, which affects an estimated two million people in Britain each year and results in the loss of some 18.9 million working days due to stress-related illnesses. Yet many fail to realise they are being bullied (at least in the early stages) and many others fail to speak out, either because they don't know what to do or because they fear repercussions.

What is bullying?

Bullying at work can take many forms and occur in a variety of situations, but it usually involves an abuse of power and position. It has been described as:

Persistent, offensive, abusive, intimidating, malicious and insulting behaviour, abuse of power or unfair penal sanction, which makes the recipient feel upset, threatened, humiliated or vulnerable, which undermines their self-confidence and which may cause them to suffer stress.

Examples of bullying can range from violence and intimidation to less obvious actions such as ignoring, marginalizing or isolating you at work. All forms of bullying, however, can make you feel upset, fearful, threatened and vulnerable. They can also gradually wear you down and can lead to anxiety, loss of self-confidence, illness and even thoughts of suicide.

How to recognise it

Workplace bullying can sometimes be hard to recognise and many people can see things are going wrong well before they realise they are being bullied. It is therefore important to look out for the warning signs.

If you feel that the working relationship between you and your manager or colleagues has changed, that you are being 'got at', that your work is being unfairly criticised or that you are beginning to question your own competence – the reason may be that you are being bullied.

If you are suffering from sleeplessness, loss of appetite, headaches, skin complaints, stomach problems, depression, panic attacks, mood swings, lethargy or lack of motivation – the reason may be that you are being bullied.

It is also important to look at whether anything has changed in your



workplace (new boss, more work pressure, business reorganisation etc) and to work out whether this helps explain why the way you are being treated has changed.

Analysing what is happening to you, and why, is important. But it is even more important to realise that it is the bully, rather than you, who is to blame. You should, therefore, maintain your self-respect and avoid questioning your own competence or your ability to fight back.

What can be done about it?

Bullying often affects its victims so badly that they feel helpless and incapable of doing anything about it. But doing nothing and hoping it will go away can lead to the situation getting worse and becoming more difficult to deal with.

If you are being bullied, it may be hard to think positively but it is vital that you decide from the start that you will not suffer alone or in silence and that you will not allow the bullying to continue unchallenged. The following are amongst the things you should do:

- **Talk to somebody** – family members, friends, trusted colleagues, your union representative and doctor can all give you valuable support and advice, and help you decide how to respond.
- **Find out about bullying** – contact or look up the web sites of your union, advice agencies or anti-bullying organisations, and check to see whether your employer has a policy on bullying and how to deal with it. You will be far more confident and capable of taking action if you understand the issues and the options open to you.
- **Keep a diary** – record all instances of bullying or inappropriate behaviour in detail, not forgetting to note dates, times, witnesses and how what was said or done affected you. This will help you build a case against the bully and your record may be used later as evidence.
- **Get support from colleagues** – your colleagues may not know what is happening to you or may even be subject to bullying themselves. If you support each other in any way you can, including by making a joint complaint, it will stop the bullying far more quickly.
- **Confront the bully** – try to make clear to the person bullying you that their behaviour is unacceptable and must stop. Make sure that there is somebody else nearby when you do this, speak in as calm and reasoned a manner as possible and don't get into an argument. If you don't feel able to confront the bully on your own, get support from a colleague, union representative or supportive manager. Alternatively put it in writing (and keep a copy).
- **Respond to criticisms** – if unfair criticisms are being made about you or your performance, make sure you respond so that there is a record of your side of the story. This is best done with a witness present or in writing. Keep copies of any written or e-mailed complaints and of your response.
- **Speak to Human Resources** – a word with HR or with a sympathetic manager may lead to the bully being warned off informally. Keep a record, however, in case the bully tries to take it out on you later. Be aware that while this semi-formal approach may work, it could also lead to pressure on you to make a formal complaint.
- **Make a formal complaint** - Complain in writing to management, following the company's grievance or bullying procedures if possible. Get union advice when doing this and have a union representative at any meetings. Management should then investigate fully and you will be expected to give them as much evidence as possible. If bullying is proven, they should take disciplinary action (which may include dismissal) against the perpetrator.
- **Consider legal action** – if effective management action is not taken to end the bullying, take advice from your union or advisor on what legal options may be open to you. While there is no specific offence of 'bullying' in British law, it may be possible to take action under discrimination legislation, protection from harassment legislation or for personal injury. In some cases, successful legal action could result in the bully being fined, forced to pay compensation or (in rare cases) imprisoned. Successful action could also result in the company being forced to pay compensation.

BULLYING CAN BE BEATEN

Bullying will continue to exist as long as staff fail to stand up to it and management condone it, turn a blind eye to it or fail to crack down on it. It can be defeated when staff and the union leave management with no option but to put a stop to it. This may take courage and determination but it is worth it – and far better than the alternative of allowing bullying, and all the misery it causes, to continue unchallenged.

Where to get help

Your union is usually the first port of call when you are being bullied at work.

Amicus members can get help from your local representative, from your local Amicus office (details on www.amicustheunion.org) or from the Amicus National Helpline on 0845 850 4242.

Other sources of help include:

The Advisory, Conciliation & Arbitration Service
08457 474747 or www.acas.org.uk

The Andrea Adams Trust (an anti-bullying charity)
01273 704 900 or www.andreaadamstrust.org

The Ban Bullying at Work campaign
www.banbullyingatwork.com

The Labour Research Department also has a very useful and inexpensive guide on tackling bullying and harassment at work. This is available from LRD on 020 7929 0621 or www.lrd.org.uk