

Bullying at work

What bullying is

Although there is no legal definition of bullying, it can be described as unwanted behaviour from a person or group that is either:

- offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting
- an abuse or misuse of power that undermines, humiliates, or causes physical or emotional harm to someone

Bullying might:

- be a regular pattern of behaviour or a one-off incident
- happen face-to-face, on social media, in emails or calls
- happen at work or in other work-related situations
- not always be obvious or noticed by others

It's possible someone might not know their behaviour is bullying. It can still be bullying even if they do not realise it or do not intend to bully someone.

Examples of bullying

Examples of bullying at work could include:

- constantly criticising someone's work
- spreading malicious rumours about someone
- constantly putting someone down in meetings
- deliberately giving someone a heavier workload than everyone else
- excluding someone from team social events
- putting humiliating, offensive or threatening comments or photos on social media

Upward bullying

Bullying can also happen towards someone more senior, for example a manager. This is sometimes called 'upward bullying' or 'subordinate bullying'.

It can be from one worker or a group of workers.

Examples of upward bullying can include:

- showing continued disrespect
- refusing to complete tasks
- spreading rumours

- constantly undermining someone's authority
- doing things to make someone seem unskilled or unable to do their job properly

It can be difficult for someone in a senior role to realise they're experiencing bullying behaviour.

It's important to consider the real reasons for the behaviour. For example, there might be a wider issue with the culture of the organisation that can be identified and addressed.

When bullying might be discrimination

There is no specific law against bullying.

However, by law (Equality Act 2010), bullying behaviour can be discrimination if it relates to any of the following 'protected characteristics':

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment
- race
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation

There are 4 main types of discrimination:

- direct
- indirect
- harassment
- victimisation

Depending on the bullying involved, it could become any of these 4 types of discrimination.

[Find out more about discrimination](#)

Other legal issues when bullying is not discrimination

Bullying that's not classed as discrimination could still lead to other legal issues. For example, if severe bullying makes an employee resign, this could contribute towards [constructive dismissal](#).

Employer responsibilities

Employers and workers have a mutual duty to treat each other honestly and with respect.

This means workers have the right to:

- have trust and confidence in their employer
- expect not to be bullied at work

Employers have the right to:

- expect workers not to bully each other

- expect workers to treat their managers with respect and follow all reasonable instructions

Employers also have a legal duty of care to protect their workers from harm. This includes dealing with bullying issues.

Employers should:

- do all they can to try to prevent bullying happening
- take any bullying complaint seriously and look into it as soon as possible

[Find out how employers should handle a bullying complaint](#)

Get more advice and support

If you need help with understanding bullying, you can [contact the Acas helpline](#).

Acas also offers [free e-learning on bullying and harassment](#).