# About a third of employees have faced bullying at work—here's how to recognize and deal with it

February 8 2024, by Jason Walker and Deborah Circo

The phenomenon of bullying, harassment and sexual abuse in workplaces throughout North America is widespread and harmful to both individuals and organizations. In fact, bullying at work affects up to 30% of workers over time.

As practitioners and researchers who study workplace violence, including bullying, harassment and sexual abuse, we define workplace bullying as harmful acts of mistreatment between people that go beyond incivility and cross the line to intentionally causing harm.

Bullying behaviors range from verbally insulting or socially excluding someone to sabotaging the victim's work, inflicting psychological terror and engaging in sexual abuse or physical aggression. Manipulation and provocation also play a role in bullying dynamics, and cyberbullying has emerged as a new form of workplace harassment. Research suggests the impacts of workplace bullying affect employee health and safety and the workplace overall.

In a grocery store line, if someone invades your space, shoves you aside or threatens physical harm, the police may intervene, potentially resulting in an arrest. However, in the workplace, incidents involving bullying, assault, sexual abuse or other forms of violence are typically addressed through internal investigations. Our research suggests that treating workplace bullying as a matter of public health rather than employment law is necessary to protect those being targeted.

## Workplace bullying results in real harms

Targets of workplace bullying often experience serious repercussions,

including stress and burnout, along with other [diagnosed mental health issues](#) and, in extreme cases, suicide.

Bullying can [affect physical health](#), with symptoms including sleep disturbances, cardiovascular diseases, body aches and pain, loss of appetite and headaches. Targets often describe an [inability to concentrate](#); since they're spending time worrying about what is going to happen to them next, job performance suffers. The [negative impacts](#) can [spill over to a target's personal life](#) and affect their relationships with family and friends.

It's not unusual for targeted workers to feel uncomfortable coming forward and talking about their experiences. But suffering in silence can lead to an even more [toxic climate](#) at work that can undermine your victims' sense of security, with long-term consequences for their well-being.

## Personality traits of bullies and their targets

Workplace [bullies](#) often target those who possess [qualities highly valued by employers](#): self-sufficiency, cautiousness and innovativeness. Those targeted typically are motivated, have a kind perspective and prefer to avoid getting involved in office politics or engaging in competitive behavior. They take charge of their work and responsibilities.

Bullying often involves an [imbalance of power](#), where the perpetrator acts to obtain power and control over the target.

Researchers find that [bullies tend to have](#) [low self-esteem](#), problems with anger management and even personality disorders. Bullies often target people based on their appearance, behavior, race, religion, educational background, LGBTQ+ identity or because of perceived threats to their own career.

There's no hard-and-fast profile, but males tend to exhibit more of the traits associated with bullying. Those who possess tendencies toward what psychologists call [dark triad traits](#)—[Machiavellianism](#), subclinical [psychopathy](#) and subclinical narcissism—often gravitate toward jobs that offer high levels of freedom and hierarchical structures.

## Are you being bullied?

Have you noticed a [decline in your emotional or physical health](#)? Is your job performance being affected? Feeling constantly stressed, anxious or demoralized are signs that something isn't right.

Think about whether you feel singled out. Do you sense that you're being isolated because of how others treat you?

If you do conclude you're being bullied, your [first priority is keeping yourself safe](#). Defending yourself against workplace bullying takes courage, but there are steps you can take to diffuse, distance and document what is happening to you.

In the moment when bullying is occurring, focus on trying to keep your emotions in check and avoid being reactive. For example, try to [gain some psychological distance](#) in an emotionally charged situation—politely walk away, don't engage, give yourself time to settle your emotions. Taking space by stepping away can disrupt the immediate intensity of the situation. It helps you stay in control rather than allowing a bully to force you to respond impulsively in the moment, which can lead you to say or do something you'll regret.

Try your best to de-escalate the situation. Some tips for how to stop an interaction from spiraling include:

- Using polite, firm language to ask the bully to stop the

conversation.
- Asking the bully to leave.
- Removing yourself from the situation if the bully won't go.
- Informing your supervisor immediately.

If you feel threatened, calmly and politely stop the interaction by [removing yourself in a nonthreatening way](#). As challenging as it can be, the key here is to stay composed and remain respectful.

## How to respond to an ongoing situation

It may be helpful to engage in some advanced planning with a friend or colleague. Rehearse a bullying situation and practice how you would respond to help you get comfortable [using emotional distancing and de-escalation](#). Advance practice can help you handle an emotionally charged encounter.

Seek the support and [safety of your peers](#). They can talk things through with you and become your allies if they are asked to describe or even testify about a bullying incident they witnessed.

Strive for an attitude of strength and confidence in yourself. Workplace bullies often choose to attack people they peg as easy targets. Present a strong front, trust in yourself and have confidence in your work—these attributes may make you less [likely to be targeted](#).

[Document your experiences](#) when you perceive there is a problem. Be objective: Note the time and date, what happened, who was present, what was said and how it made you feel. Keeping a record helps quantify what is happening. Your organization should have [policies and procedures](#) to support you if you believe you are being bullied at work.

A caveat, though: Keep in mind, human resources departments are often

ill-equipped to manage these issues, and complaints may be [mishandled](#), [improperly dismissed](#) or simply ignored. Sometimes, if you're able, it is better to look for a new job.

In order to effectively tackle the problem of workplace bullying and harassment, it is important for both employees and organizations to acknowledge and actively address these concerns. By establishing policies against bullying and fostering open lines of communication, workplaces can create safer spaces that enhance the well-being and productivity of their employees.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation