

8 ways to deal with a BULLY at WORK



A staggering one in five staff in the NHS have been bullied at work, a new study published today in the *British Medical Journal* (BMJ) has found

Perhaps even more surprisingly, almost half had witnessed other people being bullied yet only a tiny minority ever reported it.

“ bullies are often defensive people who protect themselves by aggression ”

So, if most of us are disinclined to report it to someone in authority – indeed the majority of those being bullied were at the hands of their managers – what can we do about it ourselves?

Healthista spoke to Carol Wilson, a workplace performance coach about exactly how to recognise a workplace bully and then put them in their place

What bullying isn't



Bullying is not harassment: Harassment can be a single incident or series of incidents over a short period of time. But bullying takes place over a long period of time – each incident might be trivial on its own but they mount up. The difficulty is that each incident on its own is not grounds for disciplinary action – it is the overall effect that constitutes bullying. It is the ongoing nature of the bullying which wears people down. If you feel ill the night before going to work there is a good chance you are being bullied in some way.

5 TYPES OF WORKPLACE BULLIES

Obvious signs of bullying are displays of temper, shouting at people and being overly directive. There may be overt or an undercurrent of sexual or racial harassment, or against the disabled. But there are less obvious signs that are more covert such as:

1. Exclusion from meetings this is a passive-aggressive type of bullying, which results in the excluded person becoming overwhelmed with doubt and insecurity. There is no clear boundary and the victims are left wondering whether they are overreacting and what else they have been excluded from that they don't even know about. Colleagues may start avoiding them, sensing that they are 'out of favour', which adds to their sense of isolation and lack of self worth.

2. Public humiliation this can take the form of critical comments, perhaps trivial, but constant like a dripping tap; attempts to undermine status, value or potential; being publically reprimanded for actions which go unremarked when colleagues do them; work being downgraded, and always being given the tasks no-one wants to do. Bullies may refuse to recognise achievements or give credit.

3. Being overloaded with work victims worry about looking inefficient whether by saying they can't manage their workload, or by trying to complete it but not doing it well – either way they feel they can't win. They might be given responsibility without authority but the bully takes authority without responsibility. They might be refused leave, particularly compassionate leave. I once knew a colleague who was refused permission to attend a parent's funeral. He went anyway and was fired.

4. The lying bully these types lie without compunction to achieve their own ends. They may misrepresent what victims have said, or fabricate complaints about the victims.

5. The manipulative bully this type of bullying will usually happen only when the bully can get away with it, such as when his or her own boss is not present. If a complaint is made, the bully's boss may say or think 'I don't know why you have a problem – he/she is absolutely charming!' They may present an attitude of selflessness which is very hard to expose.

8 WAYS TO DEAL WITH A BULLY AT WORK

1. Stay neutral and try not to react. Bullies feed on fear. Keep it positive: when did you last give your bosses any feedback about their performance? Praise them when they manage you in the way you want to be managed, then they will know you want more of it and are more likely to behave that way in order to receive more praise. It is like giving dogs biscuits when they jump through hoops.

2. Use coaching skills Show that you are listening and paying attention to what has been said by repeating the bully's words back to them. It can be a surprise when we hear our own words repeated

back. After listening properly, ask permission to state your case: 'Can I tell you what I think about xxx?' Bullies need to feel in control, and asking permission increases people's sense of control, thereby lowering aggressive behaviour.

3. Ask questions for information rather than emotional ones, for example 'Can you tell me which parts of my report you didn't approve of and do you have any suggestions that will help me to re-write it? What might you have said instead?'

4. Stop and take note The Buddhist practice of mindfulness is being taken up in workplaces during these stressful times. When being bullied, a mindful approach would mean noticing how you are feeling emotionally and what is happening to you physically, but without trying to change anything. For example, '*She's shouting at me in front of the rest of the team. I'm feeling angry, humiliated, scared. My palms are wet and there's a knot in my stomach*'. Acknowledging one's emotions in this way, and allowing them to be experienced without denying or changing them, helps us to be able to function alongside them without being overwhelmed. I have found this technique helpful for many managers I have worked with who are suffering from bullying bosses.

5. Solution focus Stay focused on what you want to achieve in any given moment, whether it is putting up with bullying in order to pay the mortgage or to win a promotion. Constantly check with yourself 'is what I am doing taking me towards my goal or away from it? What small step can I take to reach my goal?'

6. Have a positive goal Make sure the goal is something you want to work towards (for example 'a better job', 'a bigger house for my family'), rather than the thing you want to get away from (for example 'to stop the bullying' or 'be less stressed at work').

7. Talk to someone Ideally HR will be the place to go and will be able to help you. Other people may be complaining about the bully too and nothing will be done if you don't speak up. However if you think making a complaint at work will be detrimental to you, then at least find someone you can share it with, either a friend, family member, or a professional like a coach, who will listen without forcing their own solutions on you. As you talk you will start to see a way forward, that is almost guaranteed, because most people think through situations best while talking about them.

8. Know when to confront In some cases having an open conversation may clear the air and help the bully understand the impact of their behaviour. So I would never say don't do this. A pointer to bear in mind during such a discussion is for the victim to take full responsibility rather than accusing the bully. For example, by saying 'When you say/do xxx, I feel yyy, and this affects my ability to concentrate/work/perform' rather than 'You are always doing xxx and you make me feel yyy'. In fact in this sort of conversation it is better to remember to avoid the words 'make me feel' at all. We cannot always choose the situations we are in but we can choose how we react to them.

Where raising the subject can backfire is because bullies are often defensive people who protect themselves by aggression. It is quite difficult to directly address the subject of their bullying without it coming across as criticism. These types will overreact to criticism by becoming more aggressive. Criticism will trigger their 'fight or flight' response so they are no longer thinking, just reacting, and they are likely to strike out.

You can try an oblique approach, in other words getting into a discussion about the topic without triggering these defences by talking in a neutral way around the areas where bullying has happened rather than coming straight out and saying how you feels about it. In fact it is better to avoid any mention of emotion at all because that will only raise emotions. Ask about the facts and use a lot of permission, which will lower the bully's defences – and keep it positive. For example:

Bully: *Your contribution to the meeting was useless, if you can't say anything useful, you should shut up.*

Victim: *What was the most valuable thing that came out of the meeting for you?*

When the bully replies, pick out something factual to ask about. You will create a space where the bully is relaxing and feeling safe, in control. In this space the conversation may gently come round to more personal issues. Unless you feel secure about it, don't raise the subject. Even if no discussion is had about the bullying, you are creating a space in your relationship with this person which may grow in the future, until either a discussion can be had, or the bullying may even stop because the relationship will have changed.

Talking in positive terms raises energy and relaxes people while talking in negative terms makes people anxious, tense and lowers energy. I have done exercises with many groups to demonstrate this. When our energy is high and we are feeling good, problems can seem like interesting tasks, if our energy is low and we are depressed, the same situation can seem insurmountable. So whenever the bully says something negative about you, or behaves in a negative way, reply with something positive – it doesn't have to be something positive about the bully, just a positive statement or action, because that will change the energy of the situation.

Carol Wilson is the author of [Best Practice in Performance Coaching: A Handbook for Leaders, Coaches, HR Professionals and Organizations](#) (£21.99 from amazon).

Find out more about Carol's work at www.performancecoachtraining.com

