

# Bullying in the Workplace

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Autistic people are often targets of bullying throughout their lives. There are a number of reasons for this including:

- Differences in communication
- Differences in how they socialise
- Being perceived as odd, weird or out of place
- Not following the social norms/expectations
- Being very trusting
- Having a desire to have friends or fit in and therefore being willing to go along with however people treat them, or thinking that it's normal.
- Anxiety and lack of confidence to defend themselves
- Disability and differences making them an easy target to blame when things go wrong, particularly in the workplace, putting their job at risk and setting them up to be someone whom the bully can get away with threatening and tormenting.
- Being unaware that they are being bullied or that they are the butt of the joke

Unfortunately, autistic people often get picked on without intervention until they finally explode, at which point they are punished (sometimes by suspension or loss of employment) for violence, misconduct, or being framed incompetent.

It is important that autistic people have someone who can pick up the signs and advocate for them, ideally before things escalate to extremes. But it is also important for autistic people themselves to learn what is and isn't okay so that they can stay safe.

## What is bullying

Bullying is repetitive behaviour that is intended to upset or harm another person. Often there is a power imbalance. This might be age, gender, social status, authority etc.

Presentations of bullying might be:

### Physical:

- Hitting, kicking or otherwise injuring someone
- Inappropriate sexual behaviour, snapping bras, touching someone without consent, making sexual remarks etc.
- Tripping
- Pushing
- Stealing, vandalising, or breaking someone's belongings

### Psychological:

- Humiliating or embarrassing someone
- Gossiping or spreading rumours
- Harassment
- Coercion

### Verbal:

- Insults
- Making jokes about someone or laughing at someone
- Name calling
- Threats
- Teasing
- Telling someone they shouldn't exist or that they should end their life: It is a crime to encourage someone to end their life and is punishable with imprisonment of up to 14 years.

## **Social:**

- Exclusion: It is important to note though that being excluded isn't always bullying. For example, if you excluded your bully from hanging out with you, that shouldn't be considered bullying. You shouldn't be required to spend time with someone who makes you uncomfortable. However, if someone is intentionally excluding you just to hurt you or because you're different or anything along those lines, it could be considered bullying.
- Intentional isolation: telling others not to interact or engage with someone and therefore causing them to be socially isolated.

## **Cyberbullying:**

- Creating multiple social media accounts to harass or pick on someone
- Sending threatening messages
- Engaging in any of the above verbal, psychological or social examples of bullying via digital platforms.
- Sharing explicit pictures of someone without consent
- Making mean spirited posts about someone
- Sharing personal information in an attempt to embarrass, shame or hurt someone.

## **Workplace specific:**

- Constantly dismissing or shutting someone down during meetings
- Excessively or constantly criticising someone's work
- Intentionally giving someone more demands or an increased workload to others
- Only assigning unwanted or bad tasks to one person
- Holding the person to higher expectations or looking for problems (consciously or unconsciously) after they disclose their conditions or disabilities
- Giving someone unreasonable or impossible expectations
- Consistently undermining a person's authority
- Treating the person as if they're useless
- Seeking revenge
- Removing the employee from roles, tasks or responsibility without reason

- Using someone as a scapegoat
- Stealing credit
- Manipulating or seducing someone for your own benefit

## **Strategies for dealing with bullying**

- Talk to a superior, union rep or other trusted advisor. Even if it's scary, it's better for your wellbeing in the long run to tell someone or take note of times you feel you are being bullied. This creates a record and means that if something happens where you snap or things escalate with the bully, there is a history of you keeping track of what's going on. If you keep quiet then it's harder for people to help you.
- Know that it's not your fault and the behaviour is not okay.
- Have a trusted friend, mentor or colleague who can tell you when people are laughing with you or laughing at you, and can help you identify when you are being bullied.
- Talk to someone you trust outside of work. Some forms of social bullying are really hard to pin down and it can be helpful to get a second opinion from someone you trust.
- Practice what you'll say to HR or your superior (perhaps with someone you trust) if you think you'll have difficulty articulating exactly what the problem is.

### **If your bully is physically attacking you:**

- Yell, scream, call for help.
- If you have time or see your bully approaching, open the camera or voice recorder on your phone and press record even if it'll be in your pocket and only get the audio.
- Walk away

### **If your bully is bullying you by engaging in inappropriate sexual behaviour:**

- Tell a superior
- Consider telling the police if you've been touched without consent or if sexual harassment continues.

**If your belongings are repeatedly taken or damaged by someone else:**

- Report it to someone higher up, or keep your belongings in a locked draw.
- If it was an item of value, you might consider reporting it stolen or vandalised to the police.

**If you've been told you should end your life or had someone encourage you to die:**

- Tell a superior and report it to the Police.

**If you feel you are being treated unfairly at work:**

- Look into your workplace policies and procedures around conflicts and complaints.
- Seek mediation from a supervisor or HR
- Seek external mediation or involvement from a union representative
- Talk to your employer about getting disability or neurodivergence support and education for your workplace
- Document any incidents and any related communication or resolutions.