

Bullying in the workplace

Bullying at work is when someone tries to intimidate another worker, often in front of colleagues. You shouldn't have to put up with it.

Bullying at work

Bullying at work is similar to harassment, which is where someone's behaviour is offensive, such as making sexual comments, or abusing someone's race, religion or sexual orientation. It is usually, though not always, done to someone in a less senior position.

It's not possible to make a legal claim directly about bullying, but complaints can be made under laws covering discrimination and harassment. If you're forced to resign due to bullying you can make a [constructive dismissal](#) claim.

- [Introduction to discrimination](#)

Bullying behaviour

Bullying includes abuse, physical or verbal violence, humiliation and undermining someone's confidence. You are probably being bullied if you are:

- constantly picked on
- humiliated in front of colleagues
- regularly treated unfairly
- physically or verbally abused
- blamed for problems caused by others
- given too much to do, so that you regularly fail in your work
- regularly threatened with the sack
- unfairly passed over for promotion or denied training opportunities

Bullying can be face-to-face, in writing, over the phone or by social media or email.

Before taking action

If you think you're being bullied, it's best to talk it over with someone, because what seems like bullying might not be.

For example, you might have more work to do because of a change in the way your organisation is run. If you find it difficult to cope, talk to your

manager or supervisor who might be as concerned as you are. Sometimes all it takes is a change in the way you work to give you time to adjust.

What you should do if you're bullied at work

Employers have a 'duty of care' to their employees and this includes dealing with bullying at work. There are measures you can take if you're being bullied.

Get advice

Speak to someone about how you might deal with the problem informally. This might be talking to:

- an employee representative like a trade union official
- someone in the firm's human resources department
- your manager or supervisor

Some employers have specially trained staff to help with bullying and harassment problems, sometimes called 'harassment advisers'. If the bullying is affecting your health, visit your doctor.

Talk to the bully

The bullying may not be deliberate as the person concerned may not realise how their behaviour has been affecting you. If you can, talk to them directly but work out what to say beforehand. Describe what's been happening and why you object to it. Stay calm and be polite.

If you don't want to talk to them yourself, ask someone else to do so for you.

Keep a written record or diary

Write down details of every incident and keep copies of any relevant documents.

Making a formal complaint

If you can't solve the problem informally, you should make a formal complaint.

To do this, you must follow your employer's grievance procedure, or if one doesn't exist you can use the statutory grievance procedure.

- [Grievance procedures](#)

- [How to resolve a problem at work](#)
- [Code of Practice on disciplinary and grievance procedures](#)(external link opens in a new window / tab)

Some awkward situations and what you should do

Below are some examples of awkward situations you might face at work and suggestions on how they could be handled.

Situation	What you should do
Your manager's the bully, but the firm's grievance procedure says that's who you should speak to	Make the complaint in writing to your line manager and ask that it's passed on to another manager to look into. If that doesn't happen or isn't possible, make the complaint to your boss's manager, or the human resources department.
The person bullying you is a sole trader or the firm's managing director or owner	Follow the grievance procedure. It may help you later if you have to take legal action against your employer.
You're afraid to make a complaint as your boss is violent and abusive towards you	If you think that making a complaint will cause further bullying or harassment, you don't need to follow normal grievance procedures. In cases like this, you can still take legal action if you wish.

Taking legal action

Sometimes the problem continues even after you've followed your employer's grievance procedure. If nothing is done to put things right, you can think about taking legal action. This may mean going to an employment tribunal.

It's important that you get professional advice before taking this step. Seek legal advice from a solicitor or advice agency.

Remember that it's not possible to go to a tribunal directly over bullying, but complaints can be made under laws covering discrimination and harassment.

If you've left your job because of bullying, you might be able to claim unfair 'constructive' dismissal. This can be difficult to prove, so it's important to get advice from a specialist lawyer or other professional.

- [Introduction to discrimination](#)
- [Constructive Dismissal](#)

Where you can get help

The [Labour Relations Agency](#) (LRA) and Advice NI offer free, confidential and impartial advice on all employment rights issues.

Your [trade union](#) may also be able to offer advice and guidance.

More useful links

- [Dealing with bullying and harassment claims](#)(external link opens in a new window / tab)
- [Equality Commission for Northern Ireland](#)