

WHAT'S BULLYING?



Workplace bullying¹ is repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards people at work that can lead to physical or psychological harm.

People targeted often feel they are unable to protect themselves due to real or perceived power imbalances. They are also more likely to experience mental distress and are more vulnerable to suicidal thoughts.

From a Māori perspective, to bully someone has several meanings. Some of the kupu/words used that could describe bullying are:

- whakawetai: - (verb) (-a) to threaten, intimidate;
- whakawetiweti: to threaten, make threats;
- whakawhiu: to oppress, afflict, punish;
- whakahakahaka: to threaten, menace, intimidate; and
- hawene: to harass, tease, hassle, persecute, torment.

Bullying generally has four key elements²:



a) The target person is exposed to unwanted negative acts



b) The negative acts are repeated regularly



c) They occur over a prolonged period of time



d) Targets often feel they are unable to protect themselves due to power imbalances

Is workplace bullying common?

One in 10 workers in Aotearoa feels discriminated against, harassed, or bullied at work³.

Who gets bullied at work?

People who are bullied are often highly competent and may be seen as a threat to the person bullying them. They're often non-confrontational and tend to be ethical and honest. Studies show they're also likely to be part of a minority or marginalised community.⁴

Racist bullying and discrimination

This refers to bullying or **discrimination** based on someone's cultural background (real or perceived) and/or the colour of their skin. Racist bullying and discrimination can range from casual comments or jokes right through to violent acts, and can seriously impact the mental health of the person or people receiving it. We all have a responsibility in our workplaces to challenge racism in ways big or small, and racism can often be challenged in non-direct ways, such as by reporting it to the [Human Rights Commission](#). Some more tips on standing up against racism and racist bullying are available through [Belong Aotearoa](#).

1 WorkSafe New Zealand. (2020). Workplace bullying and harassment. WorkSafe. <https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/about-us/news-and-media/workplace-bullying-and-harassment/>

2 WorkSafe New Zealand. (2018). Bullying at work: Advice for workers. WorkSafe. <https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/topic-and-industry/bullying/bullying-at-work-advice-for-workers/>

3 Statistics New Zealand. (2019). One in 10 workers feels discriminated against, harassed, or bullied at work. <https://www.stats.govt.nz/news/one-in-10-workers-feels-discriminated-against-harassed-or-bullied-at-work>

4 Gardner, D., Bentley, T. A., Catley, B. E., Cooper-Thomas, H., O'Driscoll, M. P., & Trenberth, L. (2013). Ethnicity, workplace bullying, social support and psychological strain in Aotearoa/New Zealand. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 42 (2), 84 - 91. <https://mro.massey.ac.nz/handle/10179/9483>



Examples of bullying behaviour include:



Personal attacks (direct): eg, belittling remarks, undermining integrity, lies being told, sense of judgement questioned, opinions marginalised, attacking a person's beliefs, attitude, lifestyle or appearance, gender references, verbal abuse or physical attacks.



Task-related attacks (indirect): eg, giving unachievable tasks, impossible deadlines, unmanageable workloads, constant criticism of work, unreasonable or inappropriate monitoring or denial of opportunities.

Bullying is not:

- One-off/occasional instances of forgetfulness, rudeness or tactlessness
- Setting high performance standards
- Constructive feedback/legitimate advice/peer review
- Warning or disciplining workers within the boundaries of the organisation's policies and/or code of conduct
- A single incident of unreasonable behaviour
- Reasonable management actions delivered in a reasonable way
- Differences in opinion/personality clashes that do not escalate into bullying, harassment or violence⁵.

Factors that increase the likelihood of bullying⁶

- Work relationships
 - Poor communication
 - Low levels of support
 - Hostility, conflict, criticism, negative interactions
 - Excluding people socially
- Negative leadership styles
 - 'Ruling with an iron fist'
 - Little or no guidance provided to workers
 - Responsibilities inappropriately and/or informally assigned
 - Inadequate supervision
- Systems of work
 - Lack of resources, training, support systems
 - Poorly designed rostering/unreasonable performance measures or timeframes
 - High job demands and limited job control
 - Role conflict and ambiguity
 - An acceptance of unreasonable behaviours/lack of behavioural standards
- Organisational change
 - Significant technological change
 - Restructures, downsizing, outsourcing and/or job insecurity

⁵ WorkSafe New Zealand. (2018). Preventing and responding to bullying at work. WorkSafe.

<https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/topic-and-industry/bullying/good-practice-guidelines-preventing-and-responding-to-bullying-at-work/>

⁶ Darby, F. W., & Scott-Howman, A. (2016). Workplace bullying. Thomson Reuters.