

# Respect me!

A guide for young workers  
on bullying and harassment  
at work

a UNISON

guide for members

The logo for UNISON, featuring the word "UNISON" in a bold, sans-serif font with a stylized wave graphic above it. Below the name is the tagline "the public service union" in a smaller, italicized font.

**UNISON**  
*the public service union*

## Have you been bullied or harassed?

Bullying and harassment don't just occur in the playground, they affect the lives of many adults, including young workers. All bullying and harassment is unacceptable and UNISON is campaigning to raise awareness and tackle the problem.

## How do I know if I've been bullied or harassed?

Workplace bullying includes offensive, intimidating, malicious, or insulting behaviour, or abuse of power or authority. This violates the dignity of, or creates a hostile environment which undermines, humiliates, denigrates or injures, an individual or group of employees.

Harassment is unwanted conduct affecting someone's dignity in the workplace. Harassment is linked to the nine protected characteristics of the Equality Act 2010 – age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, disability, religion or belief, and nationality. It may be persistent or can be an isolated incident.

**The key is that the actions or comments are viewed as demeaning and unacceptable to the recipient.** Certain other laws also have a specific definition of harassment.

### The protected characteristics are:

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment
- marriage and civil partnership
- pregnancy and maternity
- race
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation.

### Examples of bullying/harassment include:

- withholding information, etc so the job cannot be done properly
- unreasonable/impossible deadlines or workloads
- overbearing supervision or unjust criticism
- blocking opportunities or threats about job security
- inappropriate initiations for new workers
- unwelcome sexual advances
- ignoring views and opinions or isolating the victim/s
- belittling, shouting, insulting, or verbal abuse
- inappropriate comments dismissed as banter.

## Food for thought

Have you been subjected to derogatory name calling?

Have you ever been subjected to mean pranks?

Do you feel alone or isolated?

Do colleagues ever physically hurt you on purpose?

Are you ever afraid or anxious about going to work?

Has someone else taken credit for your work or have your contributions been ignored?

Have you been treated in a rude or disrespectful manner, yelled or shouted at?

Have others refused your requests for assistance?

Has someone interfered with your work activities?

Have you been denied a raise or promotion without being given a valid reason?

Ever been the target of rumours or gossip?

Shown little empathy or sympathy when you were having a tough time?

Been excluded from work-related social gatherings?

Been given unreasonable workloads or deadlines?

Had attempts made to turn other employees against you?

Had someone flaunt his or her status or treat you in a condescending manner?

Been subjected to negative comments about your intelligence or competence?

## Employers have a responsibility

Bullying and harassment are not just one of those things that happen. They are not down to a clash of personalities or a misunderstanding and neither is it a joke, 'just a bit of fun' or 'banter'.

Under the law employers must ensure their workers' health, safety and welfare at work by taking appropriate steps to prevent employees being exposed to harm.

There are specific laws and standards which apply or have been used to deal with bullying, harassment and stress. Employers must have policies and procedures in place to deal with these. These must state their commitment to tackling these hazards and clearly identify what is unacceptable, clarify the responsibilities of various individuals, identify the support and other information available and explain the mechanism for complaints. These policies should also have a commitment to "zero tolerance" of bullying and harassment.

## Why me, why them?

Anyone can become a victim. It may be because you are new or young. It may be because the bully views your competence as a threat. It may be due to the bully's prejudices meaning that 'your face doesn't fit'.

Similarly, anyone can bully or harass another. It may be your boss, manager or supervisor, but it may also be one of your colleagues, or even the people you provide a service for, such as patients, tenants, customers, or clients. The behaviour of the bully or harasser can be intentional or it can reflect or be encouraged by the culture of the organisation. Sometimes the person responsible may not be aware of the effect of their behaviour.

## I feel ill

Bullying and harassment can leave the victim, and other workers forced to witness it, feeling both emotionally and physically ill. Victims may become anxious, be unable to sleep, lose their self-confidence, suffer from stress and develop physical symptoms such as headaches, skin rashes, backaches and ulcers. In the long term far more serious illnesses can develop.

People who are bullied can experience negative physical and mental health issues. They are more likely to experience:

- depression and anxiety
- thoughts or attempts at suicide
- increased feelings of sadness and loneliness
- changes in sleep and eating patterns
- loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy
- physical health complaints
- decreased productivity at work
- withdrawal from social activities
- headaches and stomach-aches
- panic attacks.

In addition they are more likely to miss, or avoid work.

## Is someone you know being bullied or harassed?

Bullying might be difficult to recognise, as it can happen when the person is alone. People who experience bullying might be scared to talk about it, or they might feel ashamed about being bullied. This could lead them to try and hide

what is going on. If you haven't been present when a person is being hassled, some indications that he or she is being bullied include:

- lack of motivation
- vagueness, especially when talking about certain topics
- unusual behaviour
- physical injuries
- avoiding work social situations.

Take care that you don't immediately assume that the problem is bullying. These signs might be visible for a variety of reasons.

### What to do if you think someone is being bullied or harassed

**Talk** – it's a good idea to talk to the person to find out more. Remember they could be very sensitive about the situation and could be scared to talk.

**Care** – help boost the person's self-confidence. It can help to let the person know that you are a friend and you care. Point out all the great things they have to offer to boost their self-esteem.

**Include** – make a special effort to include the person into your group. This can help raise their confidence and may encourage them to confide in you.

**Defend** – stick up for the person. If you see someone is being bullied or harassed it might be helpful to say something. Take care not to make the situation worse or put yourself in danger.

**Help** – let someone know about the situation. Try to go together with the person being bullied or harassed to talk to your UNISON rep, employer or manager.

### Bullying or banter – are you a bully?

Have you...

- been rude to a colleague, made fun of the way they look or speak?
- spread gossip and rumours about a colleague?
- publicly humiliated a colleague?
- physically assaulted a colleague for no reason or regularly take your anger out on them?
- posted negative comments about a colleague via email, text, or social media?
- and your friends intentionally excluded a colleague from a work social activity?

- undermined a particular colleague regularly in meetings or in front of other staff?
- intentionally made things difficult for a colleague to get their work done?

If you answered these questions honestly and answered yes to some of them you are displaying bullying behaviour. Stop and think about that for a minute. Be aware of how your behaviour affects other people. Don't be the problem. Be part of the solution.

### **What can you do?**

If you're being bullied or harassed, don't suffer alone or in silence. Start keeping a written record or diary of all the incidents, including all those that you can remember from the past, and no matter how small they appear. Sometimes they are made to appear insignificant so that the bully or harasser can get away with them.

A record of all the events will help to prove that there is a real problem. Include what happened; who was involved; the date, time and place and the names of any witnesses.

If you feel able to, ask the bully or harasser to stop. You may want to speak with your UNISON rep first, and you can ask them to be there when you have the conversation with the person bullying or harassing you.

If you can't speak to the person who is bullying or harassing you directly, even with someone else there, then your rep will help you write and send a letter to them, or will send it on your behalf.

As well as speaking to your UNISON rep you should talk to your colleagues as it may be that others are experiencing the same problems. Then you can support each other.

If you are not in UNISON, then join now to get the help you need.

If your employer offers an occupational health service or employee assistance programme you might want to contact them as they can be a source of further support and advice and should be confidential.

## What can UNISON do?

UNISON is committed to campaigning and organising to stamp out bullying and harassment in the workplace. This leaflet is just one example of our ongoing work.

Locally, UNISON safety reps and stewards are experienced and fully trained so they can offer you advice and assistance if you are having a problem. They will work with you and won't do anything without your agreement. Any conversation you have with them will remain confidential. Your rep can also call on the knowledge and support of UNISON and its staff.

In addition to dealing with your individual case, your UNISON branch or rep may want to check whether this is a one-off incident or a much wider problem. It may consider surveying members and workers and may want to negotiate with the employer a new policy or a revision of any current policies.

## Other resources

Health and safety knowledge pages [unison.org.uk/safety](https://unison.org.uk/safety)

Guides/booklets from the UNISON online catalogue [unison.org.uk/catalogue](https://unison.org.uk/catalogue)

## Member booklets

Health, Safety and Young People (stock number 3912)

Information on the UNISON website at [unison.org.uk](https://unison.org.uk)

If you require further information call us free on 0800 0 857 857

If you're interested in becoming a UNISON health and safety rep, contact your UNISON branch health and safety officer for further details.

## Not in UNISON?

Join today at [joinunison.org](https://joinunison.org) or call 0800 171 2193.

**Bullying and harassment: record it, report it – don't support it**

# UNISON – where health and safety matters

Three simple ways to  
join UNISON today:



Join online at  
[joinunison.org](https://joinunison.org)



Call us on  
0800 171 2193



Ask your UNISON rep  
for an application form