Fact sheet
About workplace bullying

What is bullying?

WorkSafe NZ defines workplace bullying as repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or a group of workers that can lead to physical or psychological harm. The behaviour is persistent (occurs more than once) and can involve a range of actions over time[1]. People targeted often feel they are unable to protect themselves due to real or perceived power imbalances.

People who are bullied are more likely to experience mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. They are also more vulnerable to experiencing suicidal thoughts.

Bullying generally has four key elements[2]:

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 bullying common?

One in five workers in New Zealand report they have been bullied in the workplace each year.[3]

Who gets bullied?

People who are the targets of bullying are often highly competent and may be seen as the threat to the person who bullies them. They are often non-confrontational and may have a desire to help and develop others. They may also have a good understanding of the workgroup and tend to be ethical and honest[4].

Studies suggest people who bully others are more likely to choose targets who have a different ethnicity, religion, gender identity or sexual orientation, or because they have a disability.[5,6]

1   WorkSafe NZ. What is workplace bullying? Retrieved from Worksafe: https://worksafe.govt.nz/topic-and-industry/bullying-prevention-toolbox/bullying-at-work-advice-for-workers/

2   Nielsen, M. B., Matthiesen, S. B., & Einarsen, S. (2010). The impact of methodological moderators on prevalence rates of workplace bullying. A meta-analysis. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 83(4), 955-979.

3   O'Driscoll, M. P., Cooper-Thomas, H. D., Bentley, T., Catley, B. E., Gardner, D. H., & Trenberth, L. (2011). Workplace bullying in New Zealand: A survey of employee perceptions and attitudes. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, 49(4), 390-408.

4   Darby, F, Scott-Howman, A. (2016) Workplace Bullying Thomson Reuters New Zealand Ltd, Wellington. 226pp

5   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.

6   Westpac. (2015). Westpac survey: Kiwi workplace acceptance of Rainbow Community surface deep. Retrieved from Westpac: https://www.westpac.co.nz/rednews/business/westpac-survey-kiwis-only-surface-deep-acceptance-of-rainbow-community/

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What does it look like?

Workplace bullying can be carried out in a variety of ways:
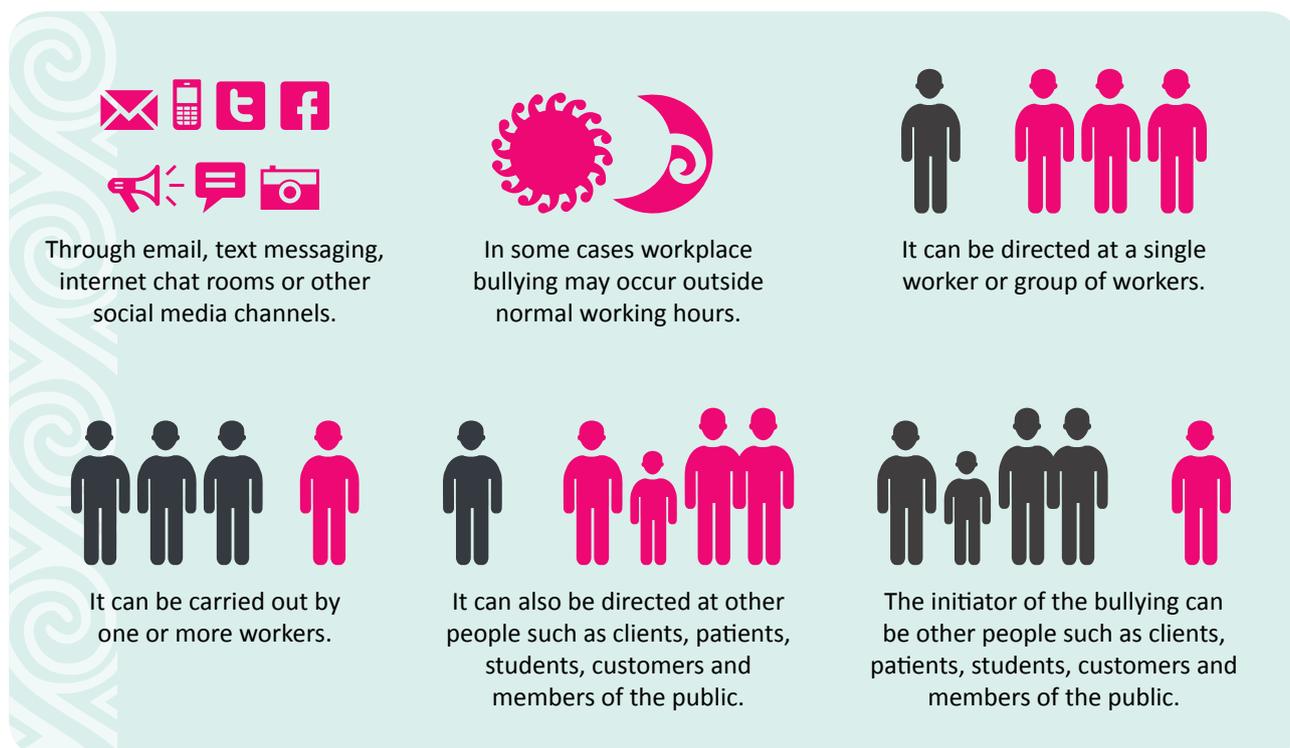
Through email, text messaging, internet chat rooms or other social media channels.

In some cases workplace bullying may occur outside normal working hours.

It can be directed at a single worker or group of workers.

It can be carried out by one or more workers.

It can also be directed at other people such as clients, patients, students, customers and members of the public.

The initiator of the bullying can be other people such as clients, patients, students, customers and members of the public.

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 opportunity.

Bullying is not

- One-off or occasional instances of forgetfulness, rudeness or tactlessness
- Setting high performance standards
- Constructive feedback and legitimate advice or peer review
- A manager requiring reasonable verbal or written work instructions to be carried out
- Warning or disciplining workers in line with the organisation or code of conduct
- A single incident of unreasonable behaviour
- Reasonable management actions delivered in a reasonable way
- Differences in opinion or personality clashes that do not escalate into bullying, harassment or violence.[7]

7   WorkSafe NZ (2017) Preventing and Responding to Bullying at Work

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Different workplaces may also have norms that are part of their culture such as friendly banter or rites of passage when joining the organisation. These practices may be acceptable when they are designed to strengthen and include, and can assist new workers to become part of the group. However, if left unchecked over a period of time, these practices can become targeted or exclusionary and could be considered bullying[8]. Organisations then need to step in to ensure all workers are safe and supported.

Factors that increase likelihood of bullying[9]

FACTOR	FOR EXAMPLE
Work relationships	– Poor communication – Low levels of support or co-worker hostility – Criticism and other negative interactions – Interpersonal conflict – Negative worker–management relationships – Workers excluded from work activities.
Worker composition (eg certain groups of workers are more at risk of being exposed to bullying)	– Casual workers – Young workers/new workers/apprentices/trainees – Injured workers and workers on return-to-work plans – Piece workers – Workers in a minority group because of ethnicity, religion, disability, gender or sexual preferences.
Negative leadership styles	– 'Ruling with an iron fist' where workers are not involved in decision making – Where little or no guidance is provided to workers – Where responsibilities are inappropriately and informally delegated to subordinates – Where there is inadequate supervision.
Systems of work	– Lack of resources – Lack of training – Poorly designed rostering and unreasonable performance measures or timeframes – Lack of support systems – High job demands – Limited job control – Role conflict and ambiguity – An acceptance of unreasonable behaviours or lack of behavioural standards – Unreasonable expectations of clients or customers.
Organisational change	– Significant technological change – Restructures, downsizing, outsourcing and/or job insecurity.

8   Darby, F, Scott-Howman, A. (2016) *Workplace Bullying* Thomson Reuters New Zealand Ltd, Wellington. 226pp
9   WorkSafe NZ (2017) Preventing and Responding to Bullying at Work

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