

When does harmless banter and teasing turn into harmful harassment and bullying?

The line is not always crystal clear, which is why bullying and harassment can occur for a long time before it is recognised, and anything is done about it.

Bullying and harassment is defined as *'any unwanted behaviour that makes someone feel intimidated, degraded, humiliated or offended'*.

Bullying can occur between two people but it can often involve groups of people, and can happen via phone, email or face-face.

It might be obvious to everyone in the office that bullying is occurring, or it may be hidden beneath the surface.

Here are three steps you can take to help eliminate bullying from your work-place:

Firstly, learn to recognise the behaviour.

While some behaviour is clearly bullying, a lot of the behaviour falls into grey areas. What is considered firm management by some may be considered bullying by another.

That's why it is vital that you acquaint yourself with these examples of unacceptable behaviour so you can cut through the grey mist and more clearly identify bullying and harassing behaviour.

Some common bullying behaviours are:

- Spreading malicious rumours about someone;
- Exclusion or victimization;
- Unfair treatment by blocking promotion or training opportunities;
- Overbearing line management;
- Or unwanted sexual advances

Educating yourself as to what is bullying behaviour can help reduce the chance of you being bullied or unknowingly engaging in bullying behaviour.

Secondly, there is a different definition for harassment.

Harassment is defined in the Equality Act 2010 as: *Unwanted conduct related to a relevant protected characteristic, which has the purpose or effect of violating an individual's dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for that individual.*

So, if bullying occurs in relation to protected characteristics such as: disability, age, sex, sexual orientation, race, religion, belief or nationality, it may then be viewed as harassment.

Remember, knowledge is power, and once you recognise a bullying or harassment offence it is much easier to take action to stop it happening to you and to avoid unwittingly doing it to others.

And finally, if you're experiencing bullying or harassment, you need to take action.

Ensure that you keep a written record or diary of all bullying incidents.

Also talk to the bully or harasser (if you are able) and ask them to stop. They may not realise that their actions cause you distress - if you can't talk to them, ask a colleague or a union rep to do so.

If the bullying or harassment doesn't stop, you may need to go down the formal route. Your organisation should have an anti-harassment policy and you should follow the advice within that.

Being a victim of bullying or harassment does not mean you have to remain one: so consider these three pointers to help you manage the situation.

Number One: Educate yourself so you can recognise bullying behaviour

Number Two: Remember that Harassment occurs when bullying or unpleasant behaviour is linked to a protected characteristic.

And Number Three: if you are being bullied or harassed, you need to take action.