

Bullying and harassment in the workplace

Harassment is defined as a workplace hazard in Alberta's updated [Occupational Health and Safety \(OHS\) Act](#).

Every Alberta worker is entitled to a harassment-free workplace. If a worker is experiencing bullying or harassment at work, we are here to provide support and help. As an employer, it is important for you to understand what could constitute workplace bullying or harassment. Employers are required to help prevent workplace harassment and violence and address incidents when they do occur.

How is workplace bullying and harassment defined?

For the purpose of psychological injury policy, bullying or harassment is defined as a repeated objectionable or unwelcome conduct, comment, bullying or action intended to intimidate, offend, degrade or humiliate a particular person or group (WCB Policy 03-01, Part II, Application 6, page 4 of 9).

A repeated pattern of workplace bullying is a serious issue and creates an unhealthy work environment which may result in a worker developing a diagnosed psychological injury.

A worker is bullied and harassed when someone takes action that he or she knew or reasonably ought to have known would cause that worker to be intimidated, offended, degraded or humiliated. It is intentional and directed at a specific employee or group of employees.

When an employer or supervisor takes reasonable action to manage and direct workers, it is not bullying and harassment.

Examples of behaviour that might constitute bullying and harassment include repeated verbal aggression or insults, calling someone derogatory names, public shaming or inappropriate comments or actions related to a person's gender, age, ethnicity, appearance or religion.

When can WCB provide support and compensation coverage in these cases?

WCB may provide compensation coverage when the bullying or harassment has led to the worker developing a diagnosable injury or illness which requires treatment.

Some related diagnoses could include (but are not limited to) Major Depressive Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder or Adjustment Disorder.

Mental stress is a commonly used term that describes a person's physical and psychological response to events or changes occurring in his or her life. These events are known as stressors. Some level of stress is a normal part of life. However, when a person's ability to cope with the stressors is overwhelmed, distress (a negative form of mental stress), can develop and result in diagnosable psychological or psychiatric injuries.

If your employee's experience at work has resulted in a diagnosable injury, WCB can provide compensation coverage and arrange for treatment.

Are there situations that would not be considered bullying/harassment?

Yes. In every workplace, conflict can arise between a worker and co-workers, the employer or customers that may feel unpleasant but does not escalate to the point of bullying or harassment.

Differences of opinion or disagreements are not generally considered to be workplace harassment.

Note: Bullying and harassment may be present when work-related interpersonal conflicts are beyond the normal scope of maintaining employment from a reasonable person's perspective.

Reasonable actions taken by an employer relating to management of work and employees are considered a normal part of employment and would not constitute bullying or harassment. These include:

- Hiring employees
- Performance evaluations and/or performance corrective actions
- Staff assignments, transfers or restructuring
- Promotions, demotions, lay-offs and terminations
- Workload fluctuations and management and/or assignment changes
- Timeline/deadline pressures
- Work environment, including health and safety concerns and union issues

What can I do as an employer?

- Harassment is defined as a workplace hazard. Employers must develop prevention plans as outlined in the [OHS Code](#).
- Do not tolerate bullying and harassment of co-workers or peers by any employee or customer.
- Investigate and report cases of bullying and harassment you have become aware of, observed or experienced in the workplace.
- Educate yourself and your direct reports on your company's policies and procedure on bullying and harassment in the workplace and comply with company expectations.
- Take a zero-tolerance approach to discriminatory words or actions, including sexual harassment and discrimination based on race, gender, religion, disability, etc.

How does WCB confirm incidents of bullying and harassment?

When adjudicating a claim for bullying and harassment, we require objective confirmation of each specific event to reach a fair and balanced coverage decision.

Adjudicators will investigate the details of the allegation by examining some or all the following sources of information:

- Available documentation (e.g., emails, texts, etc.)
- Direct witness interviews and statements
- Employer investigation results
- The completion of an investigation by WCB

Find more information [here](#).

