

Bullying and harassment in the workplace

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 and how to access compensation support for any employee who is suffering.

How is workplace bullying and harassment defined?

Workplace harassment is defined as a single or repeated incident of objectionable or unwelcome conduct, comment, bullying or action intended to intimidate, offend, degrade or humiliate a particular person or group. It's a serious issue and creates an unhealthy work environment resulting in psychological harm to workers.

*"Workplace bullying is a repeated pattern of negative behaviour aimed at a specific person or group...Although it can include physical abuse or the threat of abuse, workplace bullying usually causes psychological rather than physical harm. Workplace bullying can involve sexual harassment and discrimination. Because workplace bullying is often psychological, it can be hard to recognize. The most harmful forms of bullying are usually subtle rather than direct, and verbal rather than physical."**

*<https://alis.alberta.ca/succeed-at-work/manage-challenges/bullies-at-work-what-to-know-and-what-you-can-do/>

A worker is bullied and harassed when someone takes an action that he or she knew or reasonably ought to have known would cause that worker to be humiliated or intimidated. 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 verbal aggression or insults, calling someone derogatory names, harmful hazing or initiation practices, vandalizing personal belongings, and spreading malicious rumours.

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

WCB can provide compensation coverage when the bullying or harassment has led to the victim developing a diagnosable injury or illness. Some related diagnoses include depression, anxiety, adjustment disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

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 help arrange for treatment.

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

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

Differences of opinion or minor disagreements between coworkers are not generally considered to be workplace harassment. Reasonable actions taken by an employer relating to management of work and employees, such as those listed below, are considered a normal part of employment and would not constitute bullying or harassment unless they are delivered in a way that is aggressive, threatening or discriminatory.

- Hiring employees and terminating employment.
- Performance evaluations and/or performance corrective actions.
- Staff assignments, transfers or restructuring.
- Promotions, demotions and lay-offs.

- Periodic workload fluctuations and/or assignment changes.
- Timeline pressures.
- General work environment, including health and safety concerns and union issues.

Interpersonal events of mutual consent between a worker and coworkers or management are not considered traumatic events unless they result in behaviours that are unwanted, aggressive, threatening, or discriminatory.

What can I do as an employer?

- Harassment and violence are defined as workplace hazards. 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.
- 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, or disability.

For more information about psychological injuries, refer to the [employer fact sheet](#).

