

# BULLYING

## WHAT IS IT AND WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

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When you say the word bullying, you may think about behaviours taking place in the school playground, perhaps from your own childhood experiences or from those that you have seen or heard about. Individuals who appear introverted, withdrawn, 'weaker,' or different are usually targeted as tactics are used by their peers to intimidate to get others on their side; which can be for a number of reasons such as gaining attention and power, to gain friends or to make themselves feel good (Needham, 2019; Bullying Free NZ, n.d.).

Within New Zealand, the Growing Up in New Zealand: We are eight study has found that approximately 1 in 3 children already at the age of eight, have experienced bullying within the last year (Morton et al, 2020). A number of initiatives are in place to support schools and the children within it, to help children feel emotionally and physically safe which includes policies, guidelines, resources and programmes; a list of which has been provided by ERO (2019) and has been included at the end of this article.

Whilst it's important that bullying at school is dealt with and recognised that it is not okay, you can also appreciate that children are in the position of learning about who they are, they are trying to manage working with others, adjusting to their shared community and are trying to understand how they fit into their environment.

In amongst this they will have individual differences, needs and realities, all of which may be at the other end of the spectrum to how they and others see, live and experience the world.

That's not to undermine the impact bullying can have on a child as this can leave an internal imprint that can last a lifetime (Bullying Free NZ, n.d.). Targets may find they spend their lifetime viewing themselves in a negative way that can impact upon their self-esteem and bullies themselves often have their own negative experiences that they are trying to process and deal with (Bullying Free NZ, n.d). However the effects of bullying can be harmful and targets may experience depression, shyness, self-harm, loneliness and physical illnesses (Bullying Free NZ, n.d.).

Statistically New Zealand data shows us that from July 2019 - June 2020, approximately 20% of the recorded deaths by suicide in New Zealand were of those who were under the age of 25 (Coronial Services of New Zealand, 2020). It is also important to recognise that the rational part of a person's brain (where good judgments and awareness of consequences takes place) is not fully developed until a person is around 25 years old, meaning those under this age are likely to be processing information emotionally more than rationally (University of Rochester Medical Center, 2021). Therefore as adults, it is crucially important that we have an awareness of this and are strong role models for our younger generations.

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We need to help them make connections, we need them to feel supported and we need to help them to make healthy decisions, so that they are able to carry out healthy actions and behaviours and have a healthy view towards themselves and others.

Sadly, bullying isn't just something that happens in childhood whilst people are growing up, it can also occur within the workplace. This has led to bullying being seen as a societal issue and it's consequences linking bullying to be deemed as a Global Public Health Issue (Nazir, 2018; ERO, 2019; Srabstein, J. C., & Leventhal, B. L., 2020; Morton et al, 2020). Workplace guidelines and information have been put together to help organisations put in place processes and information to raise awareness and to support staff (Worksafe NZ, 2017).

However it is up to us all to help create positive change for our society and it can start with us all working together to become more aware of what bullying is and understanding how it can manifest and become a normalised part of a culture and learning what we can do to support one another.

### **So what is bullying and what can be done about it?**

Worksafe NZ (2017) identifies workplace bullying as:

"repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or a group of workers that can lead to physical or psychological harm" p8.

"Bullying can also include harassment, discrimination and violence" (Worksafe NZ, 2017).

Like the impact bullying can have on a child, adults can find their health and wellbeing being affected and Worksafe NZ (2017) outlines the following impact bullying can have on a person: (p.10).

- anxiety, stress, fatigue, burnout
- decreased emotional wellbeing
- feelings of reduced personal control and helplessness
- increased likelihood of drug and alcohol abuse as a coping mechanism
- reduced coping strategies
- serious physical or mental health issues including depression and suicide attempts
- deterioration in health
- post-traumatic stress disorder
- low self-esteem.

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Bullying within the workplace has also been known to be aimed towards individuals who have specific qualities that can feel threatening to a bully who may be in a more senior/ powerful role than their target which they use to their advantage (Needham, 2019). Targets may possess a number of different qualities that Bullying Online (n.d.) recognises can range from:

**being competent in their role** (e.g. having creativity, imagination, innovative thinking, able to think about the bigger picture and are good at their job),

**being popular** (e.g. are well liked, are seen as an expert where people seek advice from, and have a sense of humour),

**having character strengths** (e.g. have empathy, concern for others, are slow to get angry, have independence of thought, refuse to join established cliques and are fair and honest),

**as well as being vulnerable** (e.g. are proud of their reputation, believe they are working towards the same goals, are forgiving, have high tolerance levels and are perfectionists).

Bullying can also come out in various forms which Worksafe NZ (2017) recognises as ranging as follows:

**Institutional bullying** (e.g. this is where the organisations operate in a way where workloads are unmanageable, targets and deadlines are unrealistic and decisions are made without consultation that heavily impact upon the lives of workers).

**Task related** (examples include information being withheld or concealed to prevent the worker being able to carry out their work, criticism is constant, work is unreasonable or inappropriately monitored, no support is provided from your manager and sabotage takes place).

**Personal attacks** (e.g. this can be where belittling remarks take place, individuals are encouraged to feel guilty, humiliation takes place as well as ignoring and exclusion tactics are played).

Due to bullying often taking place because the bully feels threatened by their target's desirable qualities (such as having emotional intelligence, competence and is well networked), the bully's tactics to diminish the target's self esteem, performance and value can often be subtle (Needham, 2019).



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A bully will often use an approach Needham (2019) describes as "divide and conquer" where isolation tactics such as false information and innuendo's are given to others to cause mistrust amongst workers which result in others withdrawing, leading the target to feel isolated and communication being inhibited due to fear.

Workplace NZ (2017) highlights that bullying can flourish when staff feel unsafe to speak up to question organisational norms, when unreasonable practices and workloads are normalised, when no support is in place, where no processes are in place to deal with concerns and complaints and when people are targeted. Signs that a workplace bully is potentially present can include there being an increased turn-over of staff, sick-leave being taken more than normal, the culture of the workplace not being pleasant and performance, commitment, motivation and health and wellbeing decreasing amongst staff all of which negatively impacts upon the organisation (Workplace NZ, 2017).

### **So what can we do about it?**

The workplace bully is often charming and intelligent and will likely have excellent verbal skills yet deliberately knows how to manipulate and intimidate which they may do by exploiting vulnerabilities as well as playing the 'victim' (Needham, 2019).

With this in mind, tackling bullying can be incredibly difficult as scenarios often take place with no witnesses and becomes one person's word against another (Needham, 2019). Therefore it is important to minimize the risk of bullying occurring and one way of doing this is to ensure workers are educated and have an awareness of what bullying is and the consequences (Worksafe NZ, 2017). This empowers people with knowledge which can help support the target and can reduce the power a bully carries as they often use tactics to isolate and intimidate.

Worksafe NZ (2017) also recommends other preventative measures such as:

- having transparent policies, processes and systems in place so that workers know what to do and who to go to if there are particular issues within the workplace,
- having good relationships at work that promote a positive culture whereby staff have a shared purpose, diversity is recognised and respected, and an inclusive culture is promoted,
- systems and processes are in place so that workloads are manageable and support such as training and resources are in place to help support this,
- managers are developed so that they have good leadership skills and awareness,
- a system is in place for staff to come forward and make a complaint or to report incidences in a way where they will be taken seriously and action can take place to deal with bullying behaviour,
- support is in place so that a representative can be available for workers.

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If a target is being bullied, Worksafe NZ (2017a) recommends details are recorded such as the date, time, where it occurred, what happened, who was present, what was said, who said what, whether there were any witnesses and how you felt.

An informal process handled within the workplace can include a HR representative or a Manager liaising directly with the bully to remind them of the Code of Conduct to be carried out in the workplace as well as a mediation process (Worksafe NZ, 2017a).

If a formal process is taken a complaint can be lodged and investigated and external help can be sought as there are a number of laws in place to protect workers from harm which have been outlined by Worksafe NZ (2017a) and are included as follows:

Employment Relations Act (2000)  
Health and Safety at Work Act (2015)  
Harmful Digital Communications Act (2018)  
Human Rights Act (1993)  
Harassment Act (1997)  
Crimes Act (1961)

All in all, bullying is known to be costly to an organisation but also can have a substantial impact to a target's health and wellbeing.

Therefore it is up to us all to work together, to be armed with knowledge and understanding, to find out what policies and processes are in place within the workplace and to advocate for these if they are not present so that bullying can be addressed and staff can be supported.

If you are experiencing bullying and are in need of a support person/coach to help you through the situation, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me (Tessa) at [tsillifant@gmail.com](mailto:tsillifant@gmail.com).

You do not have to suffer through this alone.



For further information regarding bullying and what can be done a list of resources can be found on the next page.