



Bullying in the workplace

Bullying is repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or group of workers that creates a risk to their health or safety.

Bullying can occur by a single person or a group of people. It can be direct or indirect, physical or psychological, and it need not be intentional. Effects of bullying include physical and psychological symptoms.ⁱ

Direct forms of bullying include:

- Abusive, insulting comments or offensive language (including face-to-face, or by phone, email, text message or social media).
- Humiliating or putting someone down in front of others.
- Spreading malicious rumours or misinformation about someone.

Indirect bullying includes:

- Changing work and leave rosters to deliberately inconvenience a particular worker(s).
- Deliberately excluding someone from workplace activities.
- Excessive scrutiny at work, unjustified criticism or complaints.
- Setting unreasonable timelines or constantly changing deadlines.
- Setting tasks that are unreasonably above or beyond a person's skill level.
- Withholding information that is vital for effective work performance.

In defining workplace bullying, it is also necessary to clarify what it is **NOT**:

- A single incident of negative behaviour is **not** considered to be workplace bullying, however, it may have the potential to escalate and so it should not be ignored.
- Low level workplace conflict is **not** considered to be workplace bullying because not all conflicts or disagreements have negative health effects or pose a risk to health and safety. However, if the low level conflict is not managed properly, it can escalate to the point where it does meet the definition of workplace bullying.
- Reasonable management actions taken in a reasonable way are also **not** considered to be workplace bullying. Managers and supervisors are sometimes required to undertake management actions to effectively direct and control the way that work is carried out and to provide feedback on a worker's performance. However, these actions must be conducted in a fair and reasonable manner.

Examples of **reasonable management actions** include:

- Setting reasonable performance goals, standards and deadlines.
- Rostering and allocating working hours, where the requirements are reasonable.
- Transferring a worker for operational reasons.
- Informing a worker about unsatisfactory work performance when undertaken in



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accordance with workplace policies or agreements, such as performance management guidelines.

- Informing a worker about inappropriate behaviour in an objective and confidential way
- Deciding not to select a worker for promotion where a reasonable process is followed and documented.
- Implementing organisational changes or restructuring.
- Termination of employment.

Risk Management Approach

The ANMF supports a risk management approach to workplace bullying, in consultation with workers and Health and Safety Representatives, which involves:

- Employers identifying and assessing both the presence and risk of bullying behaviours by considering risk factors such as: organisational culture; negative leadership styles; inappropriate systems of work (increasing workload, excessive task demands, lack of support from management); poor workplace relationships; and workforce characteristics (new, young or injured workers on return to work plans).
- Employers implementing appropriate risk control measures to actively create a workplace environment that discourages bullying. These include: prioritizing measures that foster and protect the psychological health of workers, ensuring good management practices; effective communication; designing safe systems of work (clearly defined roles and responsibilities, reviewing and monitoring workloads and staffing levels); promoting positive leadership styles; fostering teamwork and co-operation and preventing and acting upon negative behaviours.
- Employers monitoring and periodically reviewing the control measures that have been implemented, in consultation with workers and particularly after a report of bullying, to ensure that they are effective in managing the risks of workplace bullying.

Nurses and midwives are commonly exposed to bullying behaviours because they are often employed at workplaces that have systems and organisational structures in place that are well recognised as exacerbating the risk of bullying.

It is the policy of the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation that:

1. Workplace bullying is a serious health and safety hazard affecting nurses and midwives.
2. Nurses and midwives have a right to be protected against bullying in the workplace. Bullying in the workplace is unacceptable and will not be tolerated.
3. Bullying is a health and safety hazard, and the ANMF is committed to the prevention of bullying using a risk management approach. This means that where the risk of bullying occurring is identified, the hierarchy of control must be followed in the control of the hazard, i.e. the risk must be eliminated, or if this is not reasonably practicable, reduced, using a risk management approach (see above).
4. The ANMF encourages all who experience or witness bullying behaviour in the workplace to report all instances of bullying.



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5. The ANMF expects all employers of nurses and midwives to take appropriate measures to prevent bullying in the workplace, or if it is reported, to take appropriate measures to address it and prevent it from recurring.
6. Employers have an obligation to:
 - (a) provide nurses and midwives with a working environment that is safe and without risk to health, and which is free from the risk of bullying, including by:
 - creating obligations upon managers in relation to people management, for example via key performance indicators and contract clauses
 - Consulting with workers, Health and Safety Representatives (HSRs) and Health and Safety Committees on the development and implementation of all policies and procedures.
 - (b) have written organisational policies and protocols developed in consultation with workers and managers in relation to bullying, and in particular:
 - develop and implement a prevention of bullying policy, which outlines behaviour standards, measures to prevent bullying and potential serious consequences of not complying with the policy,
 - develop (in consultation with workers, HSRs and Health and Safety Committees) specific procedures for dealing with reported instances of bullying, including independent external review processes.
 - (c) provide such information, instruction, training and/or supervision as is necessary in order to allow nurses and midwives to perform their work in an environment that is safe and without risks to health, including by providing:
 - i. education programs for managers and workers that develop an awareness of workers' rights and responsibilities in relation to bullying that includes an understanding of what constitutes bullying and the principles of natural justice;
 - ii. training (including induction and refresher training) for management and other personnel on:
 - the unacceptability of workplace bullying
 - workplace policies and procedures for prevention, incident reporting and management of workplace bullying
 - what to do if a report is made
 - iii. information about support mechanisms for victims of bullying;
 - (d) maintain appropriate consultative and representative structures (including HSRs and Health and Safety Committees) to enable proactive and fearless reporting of incidents of bullying to both management and/or HSRs
 - (e) monitor workplace relations on a continuing basis to ensure that appropriate behaviours are practised; and
 - (f) provide processes within the workplace to give relief to victims of bullying.
7. Workers should do the following:
 - (a) Nurses and midwives have an obligation to follow policy and procedures relating to health and safety, including relating to aspects of workplace bullying.



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- (b) Nurses and midwives must take reasonable care of their own health and safety and the health and safety of other persons (workers and others) who may be affected by their acts or omissions at the workplace, in relation to bullying behaviours.
 - (c) Nurses and midwives must co-operate with the employer with respect to any reasonable action taken by the employer to provide a safe and secure workplace, and fulfill the employer's duties under occupational health and safety legislation.
 - (d) Nurses and midwives should report to management any work-related bullying hazard or incident as soon as they become aware of it in order to enable preventative measures to be implemented.
 - (e) Nurses and midwives in management and supervisory positions should recognise the causes and signs of bullying behaviours by managers and review corporate risk factors in consultation with workers, and act to address these.
 - (f) Nurses and midwives in management and supervisory positions should also be mindful of their own behaviours and their potential effect on others.
 - (g) Nurses and midwives in management who are members may seek support and guidance from the respective ANMF Branch.
 - (h) Worker non-compliance should be addressed in accordance with the workplace bullying prevention policy and procedures.
8. Workers who consider they are being subjected to bullying:
- (a) Should keep a diary of incidents which are or may be considered bullying including the names of any witnesses;
 - (b) Should inform their employer, health and safety representative;
 - (c) Members may seek support and guidance from the respective ANMF Branch.

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ⁱ Effects include headaches, sleep disturbances, digestive problems, low self esteem, anxiety and depression, deterioration of relationships at work, personal relationships and quality of life.

Worker refers to nurses, midwives, assistant's in nursing and students of nursing/midwifery.