

Handling Bullies in the Workplace

By Vali Hawkins Mitchell, Ph.D., LMHC, REAT, CEAP

Bullies can range from a person who is an arrogant jerk to someone dangerously violent. They are mean, intentionally dangerous, unconscionable people. And for those of us in the workplace, the problem is that many of them have day jobs.

Freedom from Bullying in the Workplace Week is October 16-22, 2016. Bullying isn't a topic I enjoy writing about, but I do care about it. I care about freedom from being a victim. Victims have no choices, but I do and you do!

How do you recognize a bully?

A *bully* is a person who mistreats and is habitually overbearing, especially to weaker people. Bullying is a form of conscious abuse that attempts to create power over another group or person to create an imbalance of power through verbal or non-verbal threats, work interference, physical violence, social, physical, emotional, verbal coercion or manipulation: In other words, bullies are *emotional terrorists*. Emotional terrorism is a domestic terrorism that uses human feelings for ammunition.



How do you survive a bully?

- **Go Neutral:** Do not try to “fix” or save a bully unless you are a mental health professional. You can wish them well, pray for them, work with them, go to their birthday luncheon, look at photos of their dog, and be courteous and pleasant when opportunity allows – but stay awake.
- **Don't confront a bully.** Sometimes it is more important to survival to just walk away as if nothing was going on. Think of it like not looking a wild animal directly in the eye, which tends to make them more dangerous.
- **Step away:** If they come into your personal space (think of the area as your “hula-hoop”), go elsewhere. Acknowledge them with a nod or a neutral comment and then claim you can't stay and have to go to the restroom, call your babysitter, check your mailbox, or deliver an important memo to your manager. Go neutral and make an exit to get away from the risk.
- **Seek Allies:** Never deal with a bully alone. Get support, talk to someone, call a friend, talk to your manager/HR/security, call your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provider, whatever! Don't go it alone. The appropriate bottom line is you can call 911.
- **Don't be a hostage:** Bullies like to take hostages from 9-5 in the workplace. Your company probably has policies to protect you from bullying, so follow your policies for your protection. Ultimately, if you are not safe, you may need to seek your freedom by re-deciding if you want to change jobs or ask to be reassigned to a different branch of your company.
- **Name It:** Bullies are “emotional terrorists.” Bullies hope you are too “nice” to know what they are, make excuses for them, or deny their presence. That gives them the edge. In other words, they are just bullies!
- **Document everything:** Follow policies and help make better ones. You absolutely need to document, keep notes, or make a report of some kind in case your encounters with the bully escalate to the point of violence.
- **Study:** Become an expert in the topic of bullies so you can't be tricked by the variety of their behaviors.
- **Self-care:** Trust your intuition. If you think something is going on, you might be right – so stay alert. Rest when you are able and practice good self-care for surviving the long haul.

Bottom Line

Thus, freedom from bullies is the freedom to know they are what they are, the freedom to get help, the freedom to walk away, the freedom to act and document, and the freedom to eliminate bullies from your workplace.

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