

## Support at work

Advice & Support for:

Overview



IN THIS GUIDE

Tips for work and getting on with your colleagues



# Support at work – a guide for autistic people

In this guide you will find information and advice if you're autistic and in work. Read tips for interacting and coping at work, advice on dealing with bullying in the workplace and what the law says about your rights at work.

## Tips for work and getting on with your colleagues

### A workplace mentor

It can be really helpful to have a workplace mentor, or a named person at work that you feel you can talk to about issues at work. You will be able to talk to this person about the unwritten office rules, and they will be able to check whether you are confused over instructions that you have been given.

Sometimes, it might just be useful to have someone to talk to about any other issues you have in your place of work. You could ask your manager or HR team about finding a workplace mentor for you. It needs to be someone you can trust, so think of some people at work who you would feel comfortable talking to and tell your manager or HR team about them.

It does not necessarily have to be someone in your team. It is useful to have regular scheduled meetings with your mentor, so that if any incidents do occur you can talk about them as they happen and deal with them early, rather than letting things build up over time.

### Understanding unwritten office rules

There are often a number of unwritten office rules and it can be helpful to go through these with your mentor. Examples of these rules could be:

offering to make everyone a drink when you make one for yourself (depending on the size of the team)

using your own mug and washing up anything that you use

finding out the arrangements with tea bags/coffee/milk - is there a collection you need to contribute to if you use it? What do you need to do if you use up the last of the milk?

finding out about lunchtime arrangements - does someone have to be in the office at all times over the lunch period? If so, is there a rota for when people take their lunch breaks?

These rules vary greatly between organisations, and sometimes even different teams in the same organisation, so it is important to talk them through with someone.

## Workplace relationships

You could talk to your mentor about the different levels of relationship that exist at work. At work, relationships are generally more formal than those that we have with close friends and family members. Some things that we say to our close friends and family are not appropriate to say at work, and some topics are not appropriate to discuss at work. Examples of topics that are not appropriate are other people's salaries, relationships and sex.

## Informal workplace banter

The things that people talk about and the way they talk at work is sometimes called workplace banter, and this is another topic you could talk with your mentor about. Workplace banter is a form of conversation that takes place between work colleagues, particularly those who work in an open plan office.

Workplace banter is not usually an ongoing conversation, it's more a series of short bursts of conversation throughout the day. It can be quite usual for people not to stop what they are doing - to join in the banter, often people will remain at their desks and continue working while still chatting.

It is usually a good idea to show awareness that the conversation is going on - if you show no reaction, people may think that you are not interested, or that you are being rude. While workplace banter can have little consequence, it is a great way to develop good working relationships with colleagues and feel part of a team.

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You may feel like you want to start some workplace banter. If so, some appropriate topics of conversation could be:

the weather

recent television programmes or films

recent sporting events

Some inappropriate topics of conversation are:

money (eg how much people earn in your team)

critical comments about how people look (eg what they are wearing)

personal comments about colleagues

## Should I tell my employer I'm autistic?

It's often hard to understand the benefits and drawbacks of disclosing at work or when applying for work.

You may be thinking about whether your employer and colleagues will understand and react to your disclosure in a positive way.

The benefits of disclosing:

Employers are legally obliged to support you and make reasonable adjustments

There may be better understanding from your colleagues and manager

You won't have to try and hide that you are autistic

The risks of disclosing:

You may be met with a lack of understanding and adjustments

You may be worried about prejudice from your employer

You may find it more difficult to fit in with your colleagues

## How to decide what to do

To help you decide, try drawing up a list of benefits and drawbacks, ask a friend, colleague or adviser to help. List your strengths and potential difficulties. Identify what adjustments could be made and discuss these with your employer, you could also let them know what you do and don't want your colleagues to know.

If you decide to declare to your employer that you are [autistic](#), you may find it useful to share information about how this affects you with your colleagues. If you do not feel comfortable doing this, you could ask your manager or mentor to help.

There are reasonable adjustments that can be made to help you at work. For example:

writing down instructions and tasks

giving short, clear instructions

breaking down large tasks into smaller components

having a regular timetable of tasks to add structure to your working day

asking that people make it clear if you are talking too long about a subject

You may also like to talk to your manager or HR team about seeing if they will arrange [autism awareness training](#) for all staff.

Training is offered by external companies and charities and could be something that will help your team understand your needs more, and in turn lead to a more supportive workplace for you.

## Bullying in the workplace

This section explains what bullying is, how to recognise if you are being bullied, ways to help you if you are being bullied and where you can go for support. It also aims to help you at work, with tips on how to interact and cope in the workplace.

### What is bullying?

Bullying is similar to harassment. It is when one person, or a group of people, intentionally cause harm to someone else and behave in a way that is deliberately offensive and unkind towards them. For example, a bully might make jokes about an individual's disability or make rude remarks about someone's sexual orientation.

A person could be bullying in the way they speak to you, in their words and their manner (for example, verbal harassment) and the things that they do to you (for example, physical assault).

They may also be a bully in other more subtle ways, such as forcing or manipulating you to do things, leaving you out of activities, or saying unkind words about you when you are not there.

No-one should have to put up with being bullied at work. Everyone should instead be treated with dignity and respect. Bullying or harassment should not be tolerated.

Your employer is responsible for preventing bullying and harassing behaviour. They should have measures in place to prevent bullying, and have grievance procedures to give help and support if you are being bullied.

People tend to describe bullying in two ways: direct bullying and indirect bullying. Sometimes it can be easier to recognise if a person is bullying you directly, but even direct bullying can be hard to interpret. Examples of direct bullying could be:

rude remarks

jokes or remarks about your disability

insulting you in what they are saying to you or the way they are behaving towards you

overbearing supervision or other misuse of power or position

unwelcome sexual advances - this could be touching you, or standing too close to you while showing or displaying something that you find offensive

humiliating you in front of other colleagues

physical abuse

It can be more difficult to tell if you are being bullied if the bullying is indirect or underhand. Examples of indirect bullying can be:

not being put forward for training or promotion

persistently criticising your performance

setting you tasks or deadlines that you are never going to be able to meet

leaving you out or not inviting you to team social events

spreading malicious rumours about you

making uncalled for comments about your job security when you have been working perfectly

satisfactorily; for example, saying that the last person who did your job was fired for not doing the job correctly

Bullying might not just be done face-to-face - it could happen in emails or other written documents to you, over the phone, or by being unfairly monitored for something when none of your colleagues are being singled out for the same kind of treatment. This means you are being supervised in a way that no-one else is, so you are being treated differently.

## What the law says about the role of your employer

Although there is no legal offence of letting an employee be bullied, employers do have a duty of care to you while you are at work. Also, you can make complaints under laws covering discrimination and harassment.

One of the main laws we'll look at here is the Equality Act 2010. However, it's important to remember that you could be bullied for reasons other than your disability; for example, because of your race or sex, or just because someone doesn't like you.

The employer's duty of care means taking action to deal with the problem if there is bullying at work. Under the [Health and Safety at Work Act 1974](#) employers have a duty to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their employees and if they do not keep to this they are in breach of the Health and Safety at Work Act.

## Equality Act 2010 and Northern Ireland Disability Act

If you live in England Scotland or Wales and decide to [tell your employer about your diagnosis](#), you are protected by the [Equality Act 2010](#).

The Equality Act requires public bodies to promote equality of opportunity for disabled people, and there is a whole section of the Equality Act on employment.

Being protected by the Equality Act means you should be treated equally and fairly in the workplace, and should not be discriminated against on the grounds of your disability. It also means that your employer should make reasonable adjustments to help you at work.

Similarly, in Northern Ireland you are covered by the [Northern Ireland Disability Discrimination Act](#).

Jobs in the armed forces are not covered by the Equality Act. It is up to you if you decide to disclose your diagnosis. However, there can be other benefits, as well as being protected by the Equality Act, in telling your employer about your diagnosis. By making more people aware of your condition this should help them to understand the possible support you might need.

This should create a more supportive work environment for you, in which bullying is less likely to occur. It

may be that you do not want your whole team to know, so you could just tell your line manager and/or the human resources team.

Employers and managers should make reasonable adjustments to you in the work place.

## What should I do if I think I'm being bullied?

If you think you are being bullied, try to talk to someone about what has been happening. This could be someone you trust at work, or someone you see outside work. Sometimes, it can be hard to tell if someone is being kind or if someone is being cruel.

Behaviour that seems like bullying might not be, so it would be a good idea to talk it through and give examples to someone else in order to get their opinion. One good place to be able to talk about this could be at a social group for autistic people. You can find out if there is a social group near you by contacting our [Autism Helpline](#) or search on our [Autism Services Directory](#).

If you feel comfortable doing so, talk to other colleagues at work to see if anyone else feels they are being bullied or if they have seen you being bullied. It may be that the bully is targeting other people too. It is important that you do not try to cope on your own - there are other people who will be able to help you and offer support.

You should keep a diary with a clear description of what happened with the bullying. Sometimes events in isolation may look trivial, but looking at them all together shows the true effect of them. Having recorded evidence will always be helpful if you need to take things further. Good things to note in this diary would be:

what happened

when it happened

who else was there

if anybody else did or said anything

how it made you feel

If you are a member of a union and there is a union safety representative where you work, you could arrange a meeting to tell them what is happening. You can talk to your union representative in complete confidence and they can offer you advice and support.

This support could mean they talk to the bully themselves to try and resolve the problem, or they might provide you with support if you decide to make a formal complaint. This support should continue throughout the procedure.

There are a number of specialist employment organisations who have helplines you can speak to if you think you are being bullied. You can find their details are listed in the links and resources section below.

## Further help

Find out about the help and support our [Employment training and consultancy](#) can offer to your employer

Find out about our [training course for autistic women in the workplace](#)

Visit [Access to work](#)

Visit [ACAS \(Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service\)](#)

Visit [Bully Online](#)

Buy [Autism and Equality in the Workplace](#) by Janine Booth

Buy [Exploring Bullying with Adults with Autism and Asperger Syndrome](#) by Anna Tickle and Bettina Stott

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