Dealing with bullying and harassment

A guide for nursing students
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Introduction

Nursing students should be treated fairly and consistently, and with dignity and respect, wherever they study or undertake practice placements. Educational establishments and workplaces should be free from undue stress, anxiety or fear of intimidation.

But if you're a nursing student, the reality is that you may come into contact with bullying or harassment at some stage during your training - whether you suffer yourself, or see others having problems. It could be in the academic environment, or on a practice placement.

Bullying and harassment in the health sector is becoming more common. For example, figures from a recent Royal College of Nursing survey (2002) reveal a workplace climate which is bound to affect nursing students while they are on practice placement: one in six (17%) of all nurses responding to the survey had been bullied by a member of staff at sometime in the previous 12 months; three out of ten black and Asian nurses surveyed had been bullied, and over 40% of nurses with a disability had experienced bullying.

This Royal College of Nursing (RCN) guide

This guide is aimed mainly at nursing students. It should help you to:

✦ recognise if you or a colleague are being bullied or harassed
✦ take action against bullying or harassment.

We also want to:

✦ raise awareness of the problem with employers and educators as well as students - if people are aware of the problem, then they can take steps to stop it happening
✦ encourage nursing educators and employers to carry through anti-harassment policies.

What happens when someone is bullied?

Bullying and harassment undermine physical and mental health, and often result in poor work performance and low academic achievement. They can cause a range of symptoms, including:

✦ depression
✦ self-doubt and loss of confidence
✦ sleeplessness
✦ loss of appetite
✦ inability to relax or switch off from work and study.
Recognising the problem: are you experiencing bullying or harassment?

How you experience bullying and harassment is unique to you - and the result is not always what was intended by the person who seems to be bullying you. It’s up to you to decide if you are being bullied or harassed because you find the behaviour unacceptable. It can also be distressing if you see someone else on the receiving end of bullying behaviour.

Harassment

Harassment is conduct which is unreciprocated or unwanted and which affects your dignity and wellbeing at work or in your place of study. This conduct can be directed towards you for many reasons, including age, disability, HIV status, domestic circumstances, sex, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, race, colour, language, religion, political or other beliefs, national or social origin, or association with a minority (Human Rights Act 1998).

Behaviour can be harassment if:

✦ it is unwanted, unreasonable and offensive
✦ it is used as the basis for academic or employment decisions
✦ it creates a hostile or ineffective study or work environment.

Harassment can include:

✦ repeated events or a single serious incident
✦ physical abuse such as unwanted physical contact
✦ verbal abuse such as name-calling or spreading malicious rumours, anonymous answerphone messages, using offensive language or innuendo, telling offensive jokes
✦ written abuse such as letters, faxes, emails or graffiti, and displaying offensive pictures or posters
✦ obvious abuse that others see, such as mimicking the effect of a disability or making threats
✦ covert abuse such as excluding you socially, non-co-operation, implicit threats, pressure for sexual favours
✦ abuse that occurs either in the college/workplace or outside it - like stalking - but which stems from a problem inside the college/workplace.

Bullying

Bullying is the misuse of power or position. It can include:

✦ sadistic or aggressive behaviour over a period of time
✦ humiliation or ridiculing
✦ criticism in public designed to humiliate
✦ persistent, unwarranted criticism in private
✦ exclusion from opportunities or privileges offered to others
✦ exclusion from decision-making
✦ treating colleagues or students as if they were incompetent
✦ changing work responsibilities or academic assignments unreasonably or without justification, and altering deadlines or work guidelines without warning
✦ deliberately withholding information which will affect a colleague or student’s performance
✦ withholding of support in the academic or workplace environment.
Case study 1

“I had no motivation to go on with the course”

Deep-seated differences between the protestant and catholic communities in Glasgow surfaced when nursing student Fiona was in her first few weeks at university in the city.

One girl in Fiona’s class began saying that she didn’t like Fiona because she came from a different religious background. At the end of an evening out with a group of students, this girl became drunk and abusive - and shockingly, she resorted to violence. “She physically attacked me,” says Fiona. “It was terrifying, we nearly had to call the police. I ended up with bruises all over my face and neck. There’d been a few hints before, but I never expected this.”

The bully didn’t stop there. She began harassing Fiona by making silent or abusive telephone calls to Fiona, often late at night. “In class, she contradicted and sneered at anything I said, and I didn’t want to speak up any more. I lost interest because I was just so tired with the phone calls, and I felt I had no real motivation to go on,” Bravely, she did keep on with her studies.

Fiona’s parents had been very supportive of her, and urged her to speak up after the first attack, but she felt too frightened. But when she went on her first placement, she reached breaking point. “I was having to get up at 5am to travel a long way to work, and being woken at 3am by the phone just added to my exhaustion,” she says. “By the third week, I felt I was almost having a nervous breakdown.”

Fiona went to her placement co-ordinator and explained the situation. The co-ordinator was very sympathetic, and suggested in the short term that she change her phone number, but that when she could, Fiona should speak to her university.

The phone calls stopped, but Fiona spoke to the university anyway as she was frightened she’d fail the course because of the strain of her situation. The university explained how she could make a formal complaint against the bully. “But I was just too scared to make a formal complaint about her because she might attack me again,” Fiona says. “I hoped it would just go away.”

Fiona was right to speak up and seek support – “I had felt really alone, it was good to know I wasn’t on my own”. In the end, the situation eased on its own, but Fiona knows what action to take if she is bullied again.

Why does it happen?

There are no simple explanations for why one person is bullied, or why someone bullies. Personalities play a strong part, and the culture in a particular workplace or college can increase the incidence if problems aren’t swiftly and properly dealt with.

Some of the most common reasons why nursing students may be picked on or bullied include:

- **Race** - bullying because of the colour of someone’s skin or their racial background. Students can face discrimination because of their race at college - or on practice placements, where students can be subjected to unpleasant and degrading abuse from others.

- **Student status** - on practice placement, students have supernumerary status (for instance, they should be able to observe, learn and work alongside their mentor, but should not be treated as an extra staff member). At the RCN, we hear reports from students treated inappropriately because busy nursing staff see them as extra trouble, or who’ve become targets for unacceptable levels of criticism because they haven’t yet learned the same skills as fully trained staff. We also hear that moving frequently between placements after short periods can mean students never feel properly included in local teams.

- **Disability** - students with reduced hearing, dyslexia or health problems can face harassment or bullying. (Health problems may include: latex allergy - as a result of wearing protective latex gloves, workplace stress, exhaustion from travelling to placements and poor health as a result of money worries.)

- **Personal circumstances** - a large number of mature students on nursing courses have home, family and finance responsibilities. This makes them a very different group from most students, and can result in them being picked on or bullied.
What should I do if I’m being bullied or harassed?

The most appropriate approach for you to take depends on what you’re comfortable with, and your circumstances. First, you need to recognise that you may feel self doubt, anxiety or a lack of confidence, which can make you feel confused about your situation. Persistent bullying or harassment can make you feel as if you are at fault after all, or you may find it hard to decide if your situation is bad enough to take action. So take some initial steps to help you clarify the situation.

1. Talk to other people

It’s often helpful to talk informally to someone - friends, family, trusted colleagues, your practice mentor or personal tutor, a college counselling service, your RCN student steward - it’s up to you who, but this will help you grasp what’s happening and decide if you have a genuine problem.

If you are experiencing symptoms of stress or anxiety, see your GP, college medical service or the occupational health department at your placement. The RCN’s confidential Counselling Service can also help RCN Association of Nursing Students (ANS) members with these problems - call on 0845 769 7064 (local rate) or email counselling@rcn.org.uk

2. Make a note

It’s vital to keep a written record of incidents. This can be therapeutic for you, and help clarify exactly what’s happening so you can do something about it. If you decide later on to make a formal complaint, this diary of events will also provide vital evidence.

Keep your notes short and simple, and write down details as soon as possible after the incident so they are fresh in your mind. Record:

- date and time of incident
- location
- nature of incident
- your response
- your feelings at the time
- whether you took any action, and what it was
- the names of any witnesses.

3. Decide to take action

Many students are still reluctant to complain, even though their college or workplace will recognise that bullying and harassment go on, and have policies on dealing with them. Often people fear they won’t be believed, or their case won’t be dealt with sensitively and the situation will only get worse. Sometimes they think complaining will make them seem weak, or they won’t be supported.

Student nurses are sometimes afraid that if they make a fuss, it will prejudice the character reference they need to progress on the course, or that they are required to submit on finishing to become a registered nurse. This should not be a problem if your case is dealt with properly through correct college or workplace bullying and harassment policies.

The fact remains that until you do something about it, it’s unlikely that the bully or harasser will stop. It’s much better for your wellbeing if you take action, and to help others in the future by showing that bullying won’t be tolerated. Remember, don’t blame yourself for what you are experiencing, and don’t feel you have to wait until you are at breaking point before you take action.
Case study 2

“I didn’t know who to trust”

In her second year of study, nursing student Sarah went on an elderly care practice placement. A student from another study group at the university took exception to this - there’d been a swap and Sarah had taken the place of the girl's friend on the placement - and she began treating Sarah very unpleasantly.

The bully spread malicious rumours about Sarah, complaining that she was getting above herself even when she was carrying out supervised tasks, and sniping at Sarah all the time. “I tried to make peace by asking her to come on a visit with me to an assessment unit, and she just told me she didn’t want anything to do with me because I was pathetic,” says Sarah. “Once she stormed out of the home in a tantrum because I had been asked to take a patient to hospital and not her”.

“It got to the point where I didn’t know who I could trust because I didn’t know what people believed from all the bad things being said about me. I felt I had nobody to turn to, and I just didn’t want to get up in the morning any more. Normally I love my job, I’m passionate about nursing, but I got so upset it put me off studying and was even affecting my relationship with my child.”

After weeks of this, Sarah decided to take action, and approached her university about the problem. They initially advised that they couldn’t do anything if it was just a case of Sarah’s word against the other girl. So Sarah asked other staff to back her up, and the home manager got in touch with the university. The university gave the bully a formal warning after an investigation. “My mentor was very understanding and kept me in touch with what was going on,” Sarah explains. “I had to give a statement, but my personal tutor supported me, and the university offered me time off and extra counselling if I wanted it”. Sarah also phoned RCN Direct who gave her advice about what to do if she wanted to take the complaint beyond her university - but fortunately she didn’t need to.

“I’m very glad it didn’t happen in my first year,” says Sarah. “I think I’d have quit.”

The options for action

Most colleges and workplaces have two kinds of procedures for dealing with bullying and harassment - informal or formal. Start with an informal approach to see if you can solve the problem this way first.

1. Informal approach

Firstly, you could approach the person yourself and try to talk the problem through with them - they may not realise the impact their behaviour is having on you. It’s important not to throw accusations, but to explain how their behaviour makes you feel and ask for it to stop. You can ask a friend or student representative to back you up unobtrusively, but whatever you do, keep a written record of what was said, in case the problem doesn’t go away.

Secondly, if you don’t feel you can approach the bully yourself (or if your first approach didn’t work) seek help and advice from your college, or from your mentor or manager on practice placement. They can become your representative, and can talk to the bully and try to sort out the problem without using formal complaints and sanctions (this is called ‘conciliation’). They should follow instructions from the organisation’s bullying and harassment policy to make sure procedures are followed correctly.

You can clarify with them:

✦ will they use your name?
✦ when will they talk to the individual?
✦ when can you find out what happened?
✦ what to do next if conciliation doesn’t work
✦ what should you do next?

Who to talk to

There are lots of different alternatives for who to talk to - so if the obvious person (a personal tutor or liaison tutor) is actually the person who is bullying you, think about different options. Remember also that if the first
person you speak to is not very helpful, don't give up, try someone else. If you need to explore the alternatives, and you are an RCN member, you could talk initially to RCN Direct (0845 772 6100) or the RCN Counselling Service (0845 769 7064).

Here are some ideas:

at college - if the problem is with a member of staff or another student at college, then talk to your personal tutor or another member of staff, your RCN ANS student steward, or another student body or counselling service, such as the student union. Some institutions have an equal opportunities officer who can help if the bullying is discrimination based.

in halls of residence - the hall manager, concierge or accommodation officer should be your first contact, if the problem is with someone else in the hall - they can direct you to the right person to speak to.

on placement / in practice - if the problem is with a member of staff on your placement, talk to the link/liaison lecturer allotted to your placement area, your mentor/practice assessor or ward manager, or the occupational health department at the workplace. There may also be an RCN steward at the workplace. Some employers have an equal opportunities officer who you might find helpful to talk to in some cases.

You may face harassment or bullying by patients, clients or their relatives. Your employer has a legal duty to ensure that you are not exposed to any unnecessary health and safety risks, and all NHS trusts should have policies for dealing with this - so follow these procedures if this happens. Where there is no protocol, report the incident to your manager. If you feel their response is inadequate, contact the local RCN representative for advice.

If you witness bad practice - you may want to speak up about this. An RCN officer at your local RCN office can advise you (details of RCN offices can be found on the RCN website, www.rcn.org.uk, or in your RCN members' handbook, or the phone book, or talk to RCN Direct 0845 772 6100).

2. Formal approach

If the problem continues, you can make a formal written complaint. You need to follow your college or workplace policy for this, so you must talk to a representative there first to make sure you get it right. Your complaint statement will need to be clear and objective, and include:

✦ full details of the harassment/bullying - who, what, when etc (use your diary of incidents to help)
✦ the effect the situation is having on you, your work and your studies
✦ previous attempts to resolve the problem informally
✦ any relevant supporting information or evidence.

Your written complaint should then be registered formally with the appropriate person (according to the bullying policy) - this could be the academic registrar, vice-principal, workplace human resource manager or manager. The situation should then be followed up swiftly by the college or workplace, who will investigate your complaint. You may have to attend an interview. It is important that you attend as it may influence the outcome of your case. If the date or time given for the appointment is not convenient, you have the right to negotiate for another appointment, and you can take a representative with you. Depending on your circumstances, during the investigation it may be decided to reassign you to another placement, mentor, patient, tutor etc. until the situation is resolved.

The investigator may decide:

✦ there is no case to answer and further action is not justified - the reason for this decision must be made clear to you
✦ the matter could be resolved through mediation - if you're happy with this, the other party will be informed and discussions will be held to rebuild relationships
✦ disciplinary action is appropriate, in which case there may be a disciplinary hearing, and the bully may be given a warning prior to dismissal from the workplace or course of study.

If you are unhappy with what's decided, talk to your representative for details of what you can do.
If you witness someone being bullied

Nursing is a caring profession, and it’s important that you carry those values beyond patients to your colleagues and other people around you. If you see someone in distress, you should try and help. Offer to support them if they choose to speak up - but remember, it’s their decision.

In serious cases you may wish to report, in confidence, what you have witnessed to a responsible person, stating how it has affected you.

What if you are accused?

When a colleague, manager or tutor speaks to you informally about your behaviour, it may be because you are unaware of its effect. Even if you think your intentions are well meaning, if someone is hurt by your actions they have the right to communicate that to you and ask you to stop. You may be asked to consider the possibility that you are at fault. Try not to be defensive and make counter-accusations. Often a simple discussion can resolve the problem, and identify more effective ways of communicating which are not threatening. You could ask a colleague you both trust to facilitate a discussion between the two of you to help resolve things.

Sometimes, complaints can be unjustified or frivolous, even malicious. In these circumstances, seek advice from your student steward, tutor or manager to obtain support for your position.
A note for educators and practice placement providers

Nurse educators are guardians of the values that nurses take forward into their careers. NHS and independent sector employers who provide practice placements for nursing students are similarly important in shaping students’ views of a nursing career.

It’s vital that both academic institutions and employers take the issue of bullying and harassment seriously - not only because of the effect it can have on a student’s wellbeing, but also because of the direct link to poor academic attainment, high attrition rates from nursing courses and to a culture of dissatisfaction within the workplace.

The RCN’s recent Working Well Survey (2002) showed that of all the factors considered in the survey, bullying and harassment has the greatest effect on nurses’ psychological wellbeing, and is closely related to high sickness absence levels. Where employers handle bullying incidents well, the nurses concerned show much less stress and dissatisfaction with their jobs and employers.

The RCN believes that all nurses - student and qualified alike - have the right to work and study without fear and discrimination. We hope that educational institutions and employers will encourage a culture in which everybody treats their colleagues and students with dignity and respect, and where all steps are taken to minimise the occurrence of bullying and harassment.

However, organisations should also have appropriate policies and procedures in place to deal effectively with bullying or harassment when they do occur. The RCN has published good practice guides to handling bullying and harassment at work (2001) which may prove useful in developing policies - contact your local RCN representative or office for more details.

On the particular issue of providing an environment of racial equality, public authorities - and that means both educational institutions and public sector health employers (including NHS trusts, care trusts and strategic health authorities) - have new duties under the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000, now coming into force. Public authorities now have a statutory duty to promote race equality. In practice, this means that listed public authorities must take account of racial equality in the day-to-day work of policy-making, service delivery, employment practice and other functions. Under the Act, higher and further education institutions must prepare a race equality policy, assess how their policies affect ethnic minority students and staff, and publish their policy and the results of their assessments and monitoring. Countering racially-based bullying will be key in meeting these new statutory demands.
References

Royal College of Nursing (2002) Working well: a call to employers. A summary of the RCN’s Working well survey into the wellbeing and working lives of nurses. London: RCN. (6,000 NHS and independent sector nurses were sent questionnaires during 2000, and 68.5% responded to the survey.)

Adapted from the Human Rights Act 1998 enacted in the UK in October 2000, and European Community Recommendations & Code of Practice on Harassment.

Royal College of Nursing (2001, revised Feb 2005) Bullying and harassment at work: a good practice guide for RCN negotiators and health care managers, publication code 000 926, London: RCN.


Further reading

The following titles have been produced as part of the RCN Working Well Initiative and are available to members by calling RCN Direct on 0845 772 6100.

Acknowledgements

Peace Ajiboye - for all his work in initiating and developing this project

The Association of Nursing Students
August 2002
Reprinted February 2005

Published by the
Royal College of Nursing
20 Cavendish Square
London
W1G 0RN

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Publication code 001 497