

How to deal with
workplace
bullies, narcissists,
sociopaths,
and psychopaths



Table of Contents

Try enforcing your boundaries first.....	3
Why some people need to hurt others.....	3
Dealing with narcissists.....	4
Dealing with controlling abusers.....	6
Dealing with the mental effects of abuse.....	7
Recap.....	8

Dealing with workplace toxicity is no fun. This guide will cover how to deal with the pedestrian forms of light bullying. It will also cover the truly malignant bullies who spend substantial amounts of time and effort on making you miserable.

Try enforcing your boundaries first

When you're dealing with normal people (or people who might be normal), try normal boundary-enforcing techniques.

Start with the lowest appropriate level of escalation. Then work up from there if the inappropriate behavior does not stop. If the bullying is subtle, translate what the bully is doing so that you can specifically call it out.

1. Oh, you just said that [I'm good-looking despite being fat]. You didn't mean to [give me a left-handed compliment] there right?

The idea here is to give the other party an "out" so that they can save face.

2. You just [changed the subject]. Is everything ok?
3. You are [gaslighting me now]. You're being a little inappropriate.
4. You are [calling me names now]. You are being rude.
5. Ok, I've had enough of your nonsense.

If they still violate your boundaries, then there is something that your bully isn't telling you.

Why some people need to hurt others

There are two main reasons:

1. **Narcissism: they are afraid of not having social status.** Through their own traumatic experiences, narcissists associate having social status with being safe. When they don't have social status, their brain will (erroneously) tell them that they are about to be bullied or that bad things will happen to them. Narcissists need others to constantly validate them with adoration, adulation, and admiration. If they do not get it, they will devalue others. If they can't be seen as a giant, they will try to turn everybody else into midgets.

2. **Control: they need to hurt and control others to feel safe.** Because of their traumas, they associate feelings of powerlessness and not being in control with impending danger. These types of bullies are quite malignant as they need to hurt others to verify that they're in control and to gain greater control over their victims. Some of them approach *all* relationships with a master-puppet model; they will be compelled to attempt to control everybody around them. They are often labeled as sociopaths and psychopaths.

Dealing with narcissists

Narcissists are easy to spot because they are always seeking validation. They will constantly boast about their achievements and say things to try to make themselves look better. They have grandiose fantasies and often act them out as part of their “fake it till you make it” strategy.

When they interact with the world, they put on their false self and pretend to be somebody that they're not. When they are criticized, you will see who they really are: somebody who is deeply insecure about the very things that they boast about. They cannot handle criticism and have maladaptive strategies for dealing with criticism. They may rage, inappropriately attack the messenger, start conflicts with people who don't matter (e.g. Elon Musk disparaging Vernon Unsworth as “pedo guy”), bury their head in the sand, or drown their torment in a substance abuse problem.

Because narcissists can't take criticism, there is not much point in criticizing them. It will lead to conflict and nothing productive will be achieved (unless you are trying to make them appear crazy in front of other people). So, you should simply avoid criticizing them.

Do not assume that narcissists care about their own money. They constantly scam themselves because their inability to admit mistakes means that they repeat their mistakes over and over again. They are easily scammed by others because their grandiose fantasies can get them into trouble; they are crazy enough to act them out. Let them make poor business decisions. They are addicted to validation and they can't help themselves. You do not need to get involved in their poor life decisions.

Genuine praise

Genuine praise will improve your relationship with most people you meet. This is especially true for narcissists because they have a real addiction to admiration. While it is perfectly ok to find narcissists distasteful, you can always think of something positive to say about a narcissist.

- Physical attributes. e.g. Elon Musk has great hair. Leave out the part about hair transplants.
- Workplace performance. e.g. Elon Musk was responsible for the Tesla Roadster, a product that its customers absolutely love with a cult-like devotion. Leave out the part about running a profitable company. Even if somebody consistently has crazy ideas, at least a few of them will work out well in practice. Crazy ideas occasionally do work. Or, some part of a crazy plan will inevitably work out well.

At the appropriate moment, give out genuine praise to the narcissist. Your praise does not have to be overt. You can make a remark about their positive attribute and then ask them for advice/tips: “You have great hair. Do you use some special shampoo or something?” This allows you to avoid insincere flattery and to stay in the realm of genuine praise. You do not have to suck up.

If you give the narcissist a trickle of validation and avoid criticizing them, your relationship with them will be fine.

Covert narcissists

Some narcissists are more difficult to spot because they don't boast about themselves and do a fairly good job at keeping their toxic needs in check. However, you can spot them by paying attention to their reaction to genuine praise and criticism (wait for somebody else to criticize them rather than do it yourself).

How to manipulate a narcissist

If you really want to advance up the corporate ladder *and* you work for narcissists, here's what you can do. First, become a really good source of narcissistic supply for your narcissist superior(s). Supply them with genuine praise, admiration, etc. Help them with their criticism problem by attacking their critics, by pointing out the flaws in the critic's argument, and by giving them ammo to use against their critics. Basically, the idea is to become their drug dealer and get them hooked on your supply.

Then, strategically cut off your source of validation intermittently. Because narcissists are used to working hard to win validation from others, they will pay a lot of attention to your wants and needs in order to secure their next hit. By cutting them off for brief periods of time, you will create uncertainty as to your supply and make it seem more valuable because the narcissist has to work for it.

Dealing with controlling abusers

Some of these people are quite malignant and will devote a lot of time and effort into hurting you.

Their true intentions (control) may be difficult to spot as they often hide behind excuses or pretend that drugs, anger, or being an insensitive jerk is the cause of their behaviour. Misleading others makes it easier for them to control their victims. Look a little closer and you will see that there is a pattern to their madness. They need to control and manipulate others even if there is no logical benefit for doing so.

- If you are being bullied by such a co-worker, simply ignoring all of their attempts to hurt and control you will usually work. You may want to gain allies by talking to all of the bully's victims. Validate them by telling them that what happened to them is wrong and not their fault. If everybody at the office ignores the bully's games, then they will be quite powerless.
- If your boss is such a person, you may want to find a new job. At the very least, you should start working on a backup plan.

If you decide to stay, you can make their toxic needs less intrusive by creating fake buttons to push. **They do not know they've hurt you until your reaction gives it away.** Pick something that doesn't bother you and pretend that it actually does. You should try to pick some form of socially unacceptable abuse as it will give you more options later on. There is a good chance that you are in a protected group when it comes to gender, race/ethnicity, religion, disability, or sexual orientation.

Enforce your boundaries and show that you've been "hurt" when they push your fake buttons (e.g. be angry at the bully for being a toxic person). When they push your real buttons, minimize your reaction as much as possible.

Document the abuse

Start recording key pieces of it. You can use your smartphone or laptop to record in-person conversations, although test out the technology beforehand to check sound quality and whether your laptop going to sleep stops the recording. You can use Google voice, free Android apps, and commercial iPhone apps to record phone conversations. If you live in a state/province that requires the consent of both parties to record a private conversation, there is probably an exemption in the state law that allows you to secretly record your private conversations. There must be a “reasonable suspicion that another party to the conversation is committing, is about to commit, or has committed a criminal offense against the person or a member of his or her immediate household, and there is reason to believe that evidence of the criminal offense may be obtained by the recording.”¹ You probably should not post secret recordings on Facebook as it may violate your jurisdiction’s laws; check the laws first.

For all of the abuse that you do not have audio recordings of, write down notes in a journal. Google Sheets (a free service) allows you to track events in a spreadsheet and saves a history of major edits.

Take action

You can try complaining to human resources or the abuser’s superior. Evidence will bolster your case when you complain. If the abuser has been around the company for a long time, there is a good chance that the bully is being protected (usually because their superior is a toxic individual). You will want to document your interactions with HR or the abuser’s superior.

Play hardball

If you work for an organization with deep pockets, you may want to consider suing the organization for discrimination. This is a different and unconventional way of making money from the workplace. You may have a strong case if you have successfully goaded the workplace bully into unlawful discrimination, you have evidence, and the company protected the bully. You should get legal advice from a civil lawyer if the abuse gets serious.

¹ The article “Applying Illinois’ eavesdropping law to government practice” has a great discussion on the legalities of secret recordings in Illinois. One risk for engaging in legal behavior is that an overzealous prosecutor might go after a dumb case.

<https://www.isba.org/committees/governmentlawyers/newsletter/2018/09/applyingillinoiseavesdroppinglawtog>

Dealing with the mental effects of abuse

If you are exposed to repeated abuse, then you may develop mental hangups as a result of it. Your brain may put together illogical connections and link the abuse to your sense of self-worth or your performance as an employee. This is usually an erroneous connection as it is unlikely that you caused your abuse. If the abusive individual is toxic towards everybody in the workplace, then their abuse doesn't really mean anything.

If the abuse has caused you to feel low self-esteem, then try to look at the big picture. You have worked for an organization that simply doesn't care about job performance. If the organization protects the abuser, then it clearly indicates that the organization prefers abuse over results. The abuse is simply a reflection of the abuser's and the organization's flaws rather than your own.

If simply looking at the situation logically isn't enough for you, you may want to look into [more involved solutions for overcoming abuse](#). Therapy and self-therapy may be helpful in restoring your sense of self-worth and healing your mental traumas (e.g. complex PTSD).

Recap

In most cases, bullies will leave you alone if you ignore them. They don't have power over you unless you act like they have power over you.

In rare cases, you may encounter a malignant abuser whose toxicity will not go away so easily. To make their toxicity tolerable, you can try giving the narcissist a trickle of validation and giving the controlling abuser some fake buttons to push. If that won't work for you, then you should find a new job. There's no shame in avoiding a toxic situation.