



14 Bedford Row, London WC1R 4ED
Tel +44 (0)20 7306 6666
Web www.csp.org.uk

Information paper

Dealing with Bullying

A Guide for Physiotherapy Students on Placement

reference PD046
issuing function Practice & Development
date of issue April, 2015

Dealing with Bullying

A Guide for Physiotherapy Students on Clinical Placement

Dealing with Bullying.....	2
Introduction.....	2
What is Workplace Bullying?	2
Definition of Bullying	3
Why Does it Happen?.....	4
Appropriate Supervision	4
The Cost of Bullying	5
Effects of Bullying	5
Students with Learning Disabilities and Bullying	5
What Should I Do if I'm Being Bullied?	6
If You Witness Someone Being Bullied	9
Take Action!	9
Useful contacts.....	10
References	11

Dealing with Bullying

A Guide for Physiotherapy Students on Placement

Introduction

The majority of physiotherapy students experience very rewarding placements with very supportive clinical educators. However the CSP are aware of reports of isolated incidents of bullying of CSP student members whilst on placement by clinicians, patients and their relatives.

Indeed, one NHS trust in the SE of England reported that 37% of 'therapists' (definition of therapists not provided) had experienced bullying⁽¹⁾. It is worth recognising though that even bearing this in mind, there is on the whole, a lack of empirical data on the phenomenon of bullying in the physiotherapy profession.

The CSP believes that any form of bullying is unacceptable. Physiotherapy students should be treated fairly and consistently, and with dignity and respect, wherever they study or undertake placements. Placements should also be free from undue stress, anxiety, fear and intimidation.

Every university and health and social care organisation has guidelines on bullying and they are all committed to stamping it out. Therefore this guide for students experiencing bullying is designed to supplement their existing advice.

What is Workplace Bullying?

Bullying can have a hugely adverse effect on students' academic achievement and social, physical and mental wellbeing. Although there is no comprehensive list of bullying behaviours, and there is no one type of person who is likely to be a bully, the list below should give an idea of some of the behaviours which constitute bullying whilst on placement:

- Spreading malicious rumours, or insulting someone by word or behaviour (particularly on the grounds of age, race, sex, disability, sexual orientation and religion or belief)
- Shouting at people
- Persistently picking on people in front of others, or in private

- Regularly making the same person the butt of jokes
- Setting a student up to fail by unrealistically overloading them with work or setting impossible expectations
- Changing work responsibilities unreasonably or without justification and/or altering guidelines without warning
- Making unwelcome sexual advances – touching, standing too close, the display of offensive materials, asking for sexual favours, making decisions on the basis of sexual advances being accepted or rejected
- Making threats or comments about failing the student without foundation
- Deliberately undermining a competent student by constant criticism
- Excluding the student from the staff room or team meetings for no valid reason

Definition of Bullying

Bullying is often misunderstood and definitions drawn too narrowly. It is therefore important to have an agreed working definition of bullying when raising the issue on placement.

A widely used definition is:-

“Offensive, abusive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour or abuse of power, which makes the recipient feel upset, threatened, humiliated or vulnerable, undermines their self-confidence and may cause them stress”.⁽²⁾

There are, however, others, which members may find of interest or use. Spiers talks about the unjust exercise of power of one individual over another by the use of means intended to humiliate, frighten, denigrate or injure the victim:-

“The misuse of power or position to persistently criticise and condemn; to openly humiliate and undermine an individual’s professional ability until they become so fearful that their confidence crumbles and they lose belief in themselves”.⁽³⁾

As with defining violence and harassment, the emphasis must be on how the behaviour is perceived by the recipient, not on the perpetrator’s stated intention.

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 can increase the incidence if problems aren't swiftly and properly dealt with.

Some of the most common reasons include:

- Age, race, sex, disability, sexual orientation and religion or belief. Although not specific to students they can be subjected to unpleasant and degrading abuse from others.
- Student Status – on placement, students learn by having planned periods of observation, education, reflection and work alongside their educators. Students are supernumerary and should not be treated as extra staff members. The expectations of their caseload and workload should be comparable with their education stage.

Appropriate Supervision

Being on placement can at times be a stressful situation, therefore when educators may have to point out a fault this should always be carried out in a constructive manner.

There is excellent guidance on the NHS Employers' website for NHS managers and staff which is also relevant to clinical placement supervisory relationships on what is considered constructive and destructive criticism and the differences between firm but fair management and bullying and harassment.

This describes constructive criticism as focusing on:

- Actions, and behaviour, regarding what the employee has done or not done
- Facts, with specific examples of behaviour that has been inappropriate and an explanation of why it was inappropriate
- Future improvement, for example what you could do differently or what changes you could make.

If you are encountering behaviour from a supervisor that is:

- Aggressive, for example they are raising their voice at you
- Making personal or demeaning comments about or to you

- Providing negative feedback only with no suggestions on how to improve or to rectify the situation/problem

Then such behaviour is considered as destructive and is widely understood that it could lead to those at the receiving end feeling bullied and harassed.

To download this guidance visit: [http://www.2gether.nhs.uk/files/Appendix%207%20-%20Promoting%20Dignity%20at%20Work%20\(Oct%202011\)%20v3.pdf](http://www.2gether.nhs.uk/files/Appendix%207%20-%20Promoting%20Dignity%20at%20Work%20(Oct%202011)%20v3.pdf)

The Cost of Bullying

The main cost of bullying is to the individual being bullied. Stress and ill health can become part of the daily life of those being bullied. Symptoms can include: anxiety, headaches, nausea, ulcers, sleeplessness, skin rashes, irritable bowel syndrome, high blood pressure, tearfulness, loss of self confidence, and depression.

As both HEIs and placement providers have a duty of care towards students to complete their studies and enter the profession, it is in their interests to act in cases of bullying.

Effects of Bullying

Students who are subjected to bullying rapidly lose self-esteem and confidence; they dread going to placement and dread confronting the problem head-on. For some the only perceived way out is withdrawing from the placement or course whilst others simply resign themselves to it and suffer the consequences. This is obviously unsatisfactory, as it adversely affects the victim's studies and future career, often leaves them feeling it was "their own problem" and leaves the perpetrator unaware and likely to continue their bullying behaviour.

Other recipients of bullying find personal relationships (both within and outside of their placement) adversely affected, and some ultimately fail their placement as they become unable to perform adequately.

Students with Learning Disabilities and Bullying

There can be particular issues for students with disabilities where they face bullying and/or discrimination. Indeed many students who have unseen impairments do not choose to disclose. This may be for a variety of reasons, such as thinking that

disclosing will jeopardise their place on the programme, or that they might be treated differently from non-disabled students ⁽⁴⁾.

The motivations for this are complex and associated with cultural, social and psychological factors. These include:

- Pressure from others to conform socially
- Fear/ previous experience of discrimination, bullying, harassment, victimisation, isolation, rejection
- Fear/ previous experience of disclosure triggering stereotypical reactions causing stigma and prejudice
- Denial of impairment
- Unwillingness to identify with other disabled people
- Embarrassment when associated with particular images/stereotypes of disability
- A need to be accepted, especially by peer group
- Aesthetic considerations (e.g. refusal to wear a hearing aid, spectacles with ‘thick’ or coloured lenses or to use a walking stick).

For more information on this and other relevant issues, have a look at the guidance ‘Into Physiotherapy. Welcoming and Supporting Disabled Students.’

<http://www.csp.org.uk/publications/physiotherapy-welcoming-supporting-disabled-students>

What Should I Do if I’m Being Bullied?

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 can make you feel as if you are at fault, or you may find it hard to decide if/when your situation is bad enough to take action.

If you feel you are being singled out or bullied on placement, you should not have to put up with it. There are steps you can take:

1. Speak to your university link tutor as soon as possible. You could even get your placement line manager involved (even if it is via your link tutor) as there may be issues with the member of staff bullying others or trends in behaviour that manager needs to be alerted to. Whoever you speak to, reiterate that it is in confidence; tell them what has been happening. It does not mean that a formal complaint will automatically be made. Your link tutor will only do what you want them to and will give you the advice and support you need. They will want to have the bullying stopped quietly and quickly and can become your representative by speaking to the bully directly. Your link tutor, or clinical supervisor or line manager (with the consent of the university) could also speak to the person who you feel is bullying you. They will try and sort the problem out without using formal complaints and sanctions. They should follow instructions from the universities bullying and harassment policy to make sure procedures are followed correctly.
2. You could speak to the person you feel is bullying you. A direct approach is usually the best. Tell the person what it is about their behaviour that you find unacceptable, how it makes you feel and ask them to stop. They may not realise the impact their behaviour is having on you and this is sometimes all that is needed. Be firm, not aggressive. Be positive and calm. Stick to the facts. Don't throw accusations. Bullies do not like being confronted particularly by someone who is calm.
3. Keep a written record, which includes the date and time of any incidents and the names of any witnesses. This can be therapeutic for you and help you to clarify exactly what's happening so you can do something about it. If you decide later to make a formal complaint, this diary of events will give a vital record of the nature of the bullying. Also make a note of previous attempts to informally resolve the situation. Many of the incidents may appear trivial in isolation so it is important to establish a pattern over a period of time.
4. The majority of bullying goes on without other people seeing it. So tell a friend or talk to your elected CSP student rep. It is important that you do not try to cope on your own. They will help you think about what is happening and help you decide if you have a genuine problem.
5. You may face bullying by patients or their relatives. Whilst students should not raise the issue directly with a patient or patient's relative that is bullying them, it is clear that your clinical educator as an employee of the organisation has a legal duty to ensure that you are not exposed to any unnecessary health and safety risks, and

all placement providers should have policies for dealing with this – so follow these procedures if this happens. Where there is no protocol, report the incident to your clinical educator. If you feel their response is inadequate, contact your university link tutor who can then contact the line manager of the area.

Your placement provider has a legal duty to you under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, to ensure that you are not harmed physically or mentally while on their premises. All placements are expected to have bullying and harassment policies or sometimes known as 'Dignity at Work' policies in place and the CSP believes that you are entitled to have similar access to their internal processes as an employee facing the same circumstances.

If you feel their response to you is inadequate, please contact your university link tutor for support and intervention.

1. If you are experiencing symptoms of stress or anxiety, see your GP, university medical services or the occupational health department at your placement.
2. In the end you may have to make a formal complaint. Your link tutor will advise you on what you should do and support you through the process. If you do take this route, never go to a meeting connected with the complaint without your link tutor, personal tutor or a friend as a witness. Your link tutor will give advice and support throughout the procedure.
3. Your complaint statement will need to be clear and objective, and include:
 - Full details of the 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.

The investigation 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 investigation and perhaps at a later date a disciplinary hearing.

If you are unhappy with what's decided, talk to your link tutor for details of what you can do.

Such a process is quite daunting and time-consuming for a student. Given the relative power differentials that operate in health care, it is asking a lot of a student to embark on this process in an organisation that may not always be necessarily supportive of such actions. Support from the student's educational institution during this process is strongly encouraged.

If You Witness Someone Being Bullied

Physiotherapy is a caring profession and it's important that you carry those values not only in your dealings with patients, but also 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 whilst remembering that it's ultimately 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.

Take Action!

Student physiotherapists entering the profession may be particularly vulnerable to bullying due to their lack of experience, position or authority. The study by Stubbs and Soundy ⁽⁵⁾ is the first published study to consider workplace bullying in a population of physiotherapy students whilst on clinical placements. In this albeit small study, one quarter of participants felt they had experienced bullying on placement whilst it is concerning that over 80% did not inform their university.

Many students are still reluctant to complain, even though their university will have policies for dealing with it. Often students 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 only make them seem weak, or they won't be supported.

Physiotherapy students are the future of the profession and any encounters with bullying is unacceptable. Educators are placed in a trusted position where they should serve as good role models for students, and to be fair by far the majority fulfills this role very well. Physiotherapy students are sometimes afraid that if they make a fuss, it will

prejudice their chances of passing their placement or that in the small world of physiotherapy, word will get round and their name will be associated with trouble. This should not be a problem though if, as is normally the case, your case is dealt with properly through correct university and/or placement organisational bullying procedures. It is very important that students feel there are open and confidential channels of communication. One option to assist students would be to introduce the topic of workplace bullying as a mandatory facet of all qualifying programmes.

Don't neglect to report cases of bullying just because you think it will be over in 6 weeks or so and they won't have to see the person again. The fact remains that until you do something about it, it's unlikely to stop (for you or others students following you on placement). It's much better for your wellbeing if you take action, and to help other students 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.

Useful contacts

National Bullying Helpline

0845 22 55 787

Monday to Friday 10am - 4pm; Saturdays 10am - 2pm

<http://www.nationalbullyinghelpline.co.uk>

Acas helpline

08457 47 47 47

<http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=1461>

References

1. Quine L. Workplace bullying in NHS community trust: staff questionnaire survey. *BMJ*. 1999; 318(7178): 228-32.
2. Burnes B, Pope R. Negative behaviours in the workplace: a study of two primary care trusts in the NHS. *International Journal of Public Sector Management*. 2007;20(4):285-303.
3. Spiers C. *Tolley's Managing Stress in the Workplace*: Croydon: Lexis Nexis; 2003.
4. Rose C. Do you have a disability - yes or no? Or is there a better way of asking? *Guidance on disability disclosures and respecting confidentiality*. London: Learning and Skills Development Agency; 2006.
5. Stubbs B, Soundy A. Physiotherapy students' experiences of bullying on clinical internships: an exploratory study. *Physiotherapy*; 2013 99(2):178-80.