

Every employee has a right to work in an environment free from psychological harassment. According to [Humber's Human Rights Policy](#) psychological harassment, also referred to as personal harassment, is defined as: “*behavior in the form of repeated and hostile or unwanted conduct, verbal comments, actions or gestures, that affects an employee’s dignity or psychological or physical integrity and that result in a harmful work environment for the employee.*”¹ The Occupational Health and Safety Act 1990 (**OHSA**) and [Humber's Human Rights Policy](#) aim towards protecting every employee from harassing behaviors in the workplace. The amendments to Bill 168 in the **OHSA** revised the definition of workplace harassment to include **workplace bullying**. Workplace bullying can take the form of “actions or verbal comments that ‘mentally’ hurt or isolate a person in the workplace. Bullying involves behavior(s) intended to intimidate, offend, degrade or humiliate a particular person or group of people.”²

The key elements that constitute personal/psychological harassment are:

- **Vexatious behavior:** Conduct that is humiliating or abusive, damages self-esteem and cause substantial distress.
- **Repetition:** Unwanted comments, gestures or actions are repeated over time and viewed cumulatively rather than in isolation. *It is important to note that a single serious incident of vexatious behavior which has a lasting harmful effect can constitute psychological/personal harassment as well.*
- **Effect on an employee's dignity or psychological or physical integrity:** The vexatious behavior diminishes the employee’s self-esteem or integrity.³

A harmful work environment refers to an environment where an employee is isolated or excluded and subject to intimidation, excessive control and/or excessive stress.⁴

A major contributor to a harmful work environment is **workplace gossip**. Workplace gossip refers to conversations which occur between employees about work-related matters concerning a fellow work colleague, to someone who is unable to resolve the issue(s) that rose within the discussion.⁵ According to Beth Weissenberger, “workplace gossip is unproductive; it breeds resentment and becomes a roadblock to effective communication.”⁶ A harmful work environment affects the overall health of the organization. Some of the effects of a harmful work environment include:

- Increased absenteeism

¹ [Humber College Human Rights Policy](#)

² [Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety](#)

³ [Commission des normes du travail Quebec](#)

⁴ [CUPEU Frequently Asked Questions](#)

⁵ [Beth Weissenberger \(2009\) Gossip in the Workplace](#)

⁶ Ibid

- Increased turnover
- Decreased productivity, motivation and morale
- Poor customer service⁷

The key to quick and effective restoration is strong leadership support from Managers, Coordinators, Directors, Associate Deans, Deans, Vice Presidents and the President. Ongoing education on managing matters involving psychological harassment/ bullying in the workplace is necessary to fulfill this goal.

This Fact Sheet was adopted from the listed sources and developed by the Centre for Human Rights, Equity & Diversity | HR Services.

⁷ [Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety](#)