



Kōrero mai Kōrero atu

**SPEAK UP
STAND TOGETHER
STOP BULLYING**

Māuri tū Māuri ora

Workplace Bullying Prevention Guide

BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE

 **Mental Health Foundation**
mauri tū, mauri ora OF NEW ZEALAND

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The Mental Health Foundation is proud to bring you Pink Shirt Day on Friday 15 May 2026, the day Aotearoa comes together to spread kindness and take a stand against bullying.

Bullying is common in New Zealand workplaces, but at times it can be difficult to know exactly what it is or what you and your workplace can do to prevent and address it. This guide outlines common questions around identifying bullying, how you can be an Upstander, and ways you can build and sustain a positive working environment.

What's bullying?

Workplace bullying¹ is repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards people at work that can lead to physical or psychological harm.

People targeted often feel they are unable to protect themselves due to real or perceived power imbalances. They are also more likely to experience mental distress and are more vulnerable to suicidal thoughts. Many studies show that bullying in the workplace has a significant, compounding and long-term impact on people's mental, emotional, physical and social wellbeing.

From a Māori perspective, to bully someone has several meanings. Some of the kupu/words used that could describe bullying are:

- whakawetiweti: to threaten, make threats
- whakawhiu: to oppress, afflict, punish
- whakahakahaka: to threaten, menace, intimidate, and
- hawene: to harass, tease, hassle, persecute, torment.



Learn more about bullying [here](#).

Bullying generally has four key elements:²



a) The target person is exposed to unwanted negative acts



b) The negative acts are repeated regularly



c) They occur over a prolonged period of time



d) Targets often feel they are unable to protect themselves due to power imbalances

Is workplace bullying common?

One in five workers have experienced bullying behaviour in the past 12 months.³

Who gets bullied at work?

People who are bullied are often highly competent and may be seen as a threat to the person bullying them. They're often non-confrontational and tend to be ethical and honest. Studies show they're also likely to be part of a minority or marginalised community.⁴

Racist bullying and discrimination

This refers to bullying or **discrimination** based on someone's cultural background (real or perceived) and/ or the colour of their skin. Racist bullying and discrimination can range from casual comments or jokes right through to violent acts, and can seriously impact the mental health of the person or people receiving it.

We all have a responsibility in our workplaces to challenge racism in ways big or small, and racism can often be challenged in non-direct ways, such as by reporting it to the **Human Rights Commission**. Some more resources on standing up against racism and racist bullying are available through **Belong Aotearoa**.

1 WorkSafe New Zealand. (2020). Workplace bullying and harassment. Worksafe. <https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/about-us/news-and-media/workplace-bullying-and-harassment/>

2 WorkSafe New Zealand. (2018). Bullying at work: Advice for workers. WorkSafe. <https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/topic-and-industry/bullying/bullying-at-work-advice-for-workers/>

3 Kantar. (2022). Experiences of workplace bullying and harassment in aotearoa: A nationwide survey for the Human Rights Commission. Human Rights Commission. <https://www.hrc.co.nz/new-research-shows-high-prevalence-workplace-bullying-and-harassment/>

4 Gardner, D., Bentley, T. A., Catley, B. E., Cooper-Thomas, H., O'Driscoll, M. P., & Trenberth, L. (2013). Ethnicity, workplace bullying, social support and psychological strain in Aotearoa/New Zealand. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 42 (2), 84 - 91. <https://mro.massey.ac.nz/handle/10179/9483>

Bullying experienced by the rainbow community

People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, or other sexuality and gender diverse communities, experience higher rates of bullying.

Identify's 2022 [community and advocacy report](#),⁵ which surveyed rainbow workers in Aotearoa, found that:

- Almost three in ten who reported harassment at work said that they were harassed due to their actual or perceived diverse sexuality.
- Only 56% reported their workplace was supportive or very supportive of rainbow communities.
- Almost one in ten reported they had quit a job because of how they were treated as a rainbow person.

Cyberbullying in the workplace

Cyberbullying is more than words on a screen, and it has real-life consequences. It occurs when a person uses digital technology, like a mobile phone or a computer, in a way that intends to harm another person or group.

In a 2018 study of New Zealand workers, 84% reported that they had experienced cyber abuse, and 48% had experienced more than one form. 75.5% did not report the abuse to their organisation, believing the organisation could not or would not do anything to intervene.⁶ Learn more about cyberbullying [here](#).

What does bullying look like?

Workplace bullying can be carried out in a variety of ways:

- Through email, text or direct messaging, online forums (such as Reddit and Discord), Microsoft Teams, or other social media channels.
- In some cases workplace bullying may occur outside normal working hours.
- It can be directed at a single worker or group of workers.
- It can also be directed at other people such as clients, patients, students, customers and members of the public.
- It can be carried out by one or more workers.
- The initiator of the bullying can be other people such as clients, patients, students, customers and members of the public.

Examples of bullying behaviour include:

Personal attacks (direct): e.g. belittling remarks, undermining integrity, lies being told, sense of judgement questioned, opinions marginalised, attacking a person's beliefs, attitude, gender expression, sexual orientation, lifestyle or appearance, gender references, verbal abuse or physical attacks.

Task-related attacks (indirect): e.g. giving unachievable tasks, impossible deadlines, unmanageable workloads, constant criticism of work, withholding information, unreasonable or inappropriate monitoring, or denial of opportunities.

5 Fenaughty, J., Ker, A., Alansari, M., Besley, T., Kerekere, E., Pasley, A., Saxton, P., Subramanian, P., Thomsen, P. & Veale, J. (2022). Identify survey: Community and advocacy report. Identify Survey Team https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60187146e9f9034475dea113/t/6390e802bd4e535d10b72a17/1670440980159/community_advocacy_report.pdf

6 D'Souza, N., Blackwood, K., & Forsyth, D. (2018). Breaking barriers: a report on cyber abuse in New Zealand workers. [Auckland]: Massey University. Retrieved from www.scribd.com/document/390420632/Breaking-Barriers-Report

Bullying is not:

- One-off/occasional instances of forgetfulness, rudeness or tactlessness.
- Setting high performance standards.
- Constructive feedback/legitimate advice/peer review.
- Warning or disciplining workers within the boundaries of the organisation's policies and/or code of conduct.
- A single incident of unreasonable behaviour.
- Reasonable management actions delivered in a reasonable way.
- Differences in opinion/personality clashes that do not escalate into bullying, harassment or violence.⁷

Factors that increase the likelihood of bullying

Work relationships

- Poor communication.
- Low levels of support.
- Hostility, conflict, criticism, negative interactions.
- Excluding people socially.

Negative leadership styles

- 'Ruling with an iron fist'.
- Little or no guidance provided to workers.
- Responsibilities inappropriately and/or informally assigned.
- Inadequate supervision.

Systems of work

- Lack of resources, training, support systems.
- Poorly designed rostering/unreasonable performance measures or timeframes.
- High job demands and limited job control.
- Role conflict and ambiguity.
- An acceptance of unreasonable behaviours/lack of behavioural standard.
- An absence of clear processes for reporting harassment, bullying and discrimination or lack of anti-discrimination guidelines.

Organisational change

- Significant technological change.
- Restructures, downsizing, outsourcing and/or job insecurity.⁸

Different workplaces may also have norms that are part of their culture such as friendly banter or rites of passage when joining the organisation. These practices may be acceptable when they are designed to strengthen and include, and can assist new workers to become part of the group. However, if left unchecked over a period of time, these practices can become targeted or exclusionary and could be considered bullying. Organisations then need to step in to ensure all workers are safe and supported.



7 WorkSafe New Zealand. (2018). Preventing and responding to bullying at work. WorkSafe. <https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/topic-and-industry/bullying/good-practice-guidelines-preventing-and-responding-to-bullying-at-work/>

8 Darby, F, Scott-Howman, A. (2016) Workplace Bullying Thomson Reuters New Zealand Ltd, Wellington.

The case for bullying prevention

Employees who have experienced bullying report:



Higher levels of psychological strain



Lower wellbeing⁹



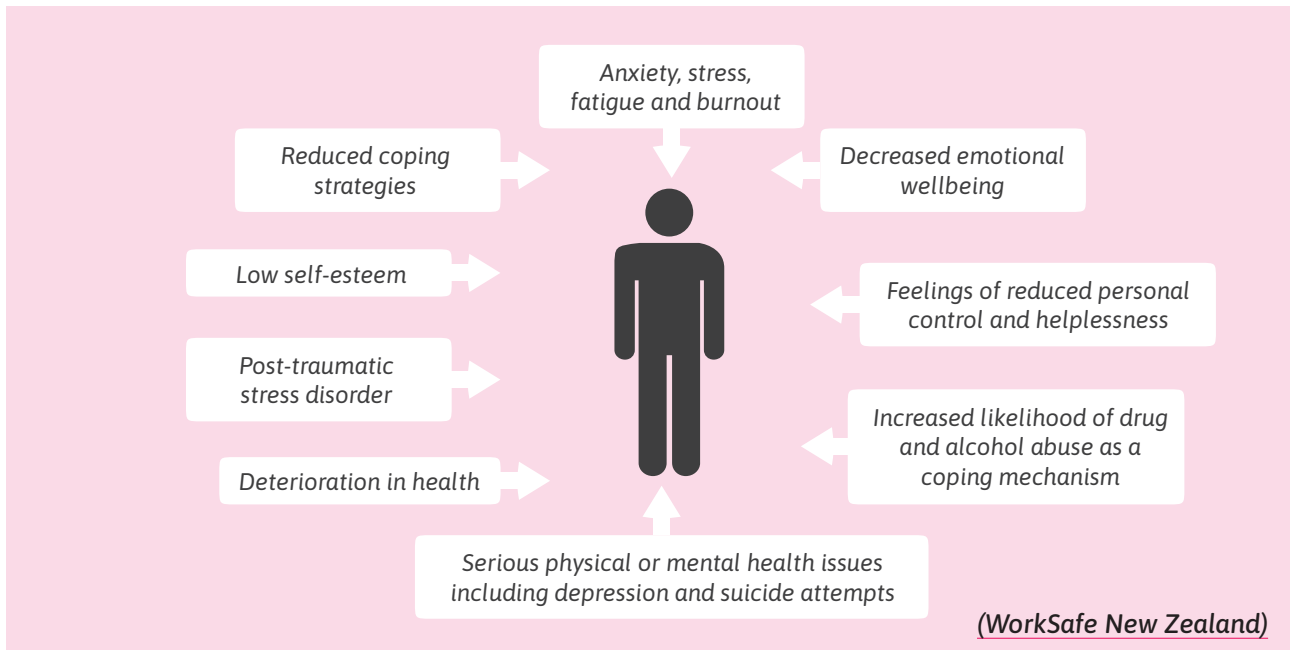
Lower commitment to their organisation



Lower job performance

The effects of bullying

Lower levels of wellbeing and higher levels of psychological strain affect individual workers in many ways.



Bystanders to bullying can be impacted too, and this can contribute to a mentally and physically unhealthy work environment.

Bullying can also have significant financial impact for workplaces. It is estimated that the yearly cost of workplace bullying and harassment for employers in Aotearoa is \$1.34 billion.¹⁰

Not only are workplaces legally responsible under the Health and Safety at Work Act to manage risks to mental health including bullying, workplaces that prioritise mental health have better engagement, reduced absenteeism and higher productivity. Improving wellbeing leads to greater morale, tautoko/support of each other, and higher job satisfaction.

For advice on how to support mental health and wellbeing in the workplace, check out our [Five Ways to Wellbeing at Work Toolkit](#), and our [wellbeing resource suite](#).

9 O’Driscoll, M. P., Cooper-Thomas, H. D., Bentley, T., Catley, B. E., Gardner, D. H., & Trenberth, L. (2011). Workplace bullying in New Zealand: A survey of employee perceptions and attitudes. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, 49(4), 390–408. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1038411111422140>

10 KPMG. (2024). Counting the Cost: Estimating the economic cost of workplace bullying and harassment on New Zealand employers. Wellington: Te Kāhui Tika Tangata New Zealand Human Rights Commission. <https://tikatangata.org.nz/our-work/report-counting-the-cost-estimating-the-economic-cost-of-workplace-bullying-and-harassment-on-nz-employers>

Creating environments that don't allow bullying to flourish

Workplaces that prevent bullying have:



Strong and well communicated policies and processes regarding bullying



Leadership commitment to preventing bullying and intervening when it occurs



Positive communication



Practices that affirm diversity

Policies should include but not be limited to:

- A definition of bullying.
- Clearly explained organisational commitments to bullying prevention.
- Clear expectations around communication and role clarity.
- Clear processes for reporting and managing complaints.
- Clear communication and direction around available support.

Once a policy is put in place, it's important to walk the talk. From a Māori perspective, for example, tikanga/Māori customs cannot be applied unless underlying values genuinely inform those actions. If your organisation doesn't have a current policy, WorkSafe NZ has an example template [here](#).

Leadership commitment to preventing bullying

A wide cultural response to bullying is essential, and leaders and managers play a vital role in this. It is more important than ever for organisations to prioritise inclusion and psychological safety in the workplace.¹¹

Workers often don't complain or seek support for fear of the consequences. Many feel that complaints would be ineffective due to the workplace cultural norms and distrust in their employer to handle it correctly.¹²

To prevent bullying, leaders should clearly communicate and model the expectations of the organisation and these expectations must be set out by the organisational policy.

Leaders and managers should access training so they have a clear understanding of the factors that may increase the likelihood of bullying and the confidence to create environments and teams that are bullying free.

It's important for leaders to be equipped and supported so they can have conversations regarding expected behaviour and know how to manage complaints that may arise.

If you're a people leader or manager, you set the standard for a respectful and inclusive work environment where bullying can't thrive.

Further ways to reduce the risk of bullying

- 1. Positive, mana-enhancing communication reduces the risk of bullying.** Working Well – Positive Communication at Work is a resource designed to build a culture of positive communication together, based on having clear intentions, asking more and telling less, valuing relationships and making it safe to speak up.
- 2. Discuss what bullying is and expected behaviours with teams on a regular basis.** Sometimes people will have a feeling something's not quite right, but might dismiss it or not feel confident enough to ask for support. Talking about expected behaviours and identifying bullying will help people be more aware of any unacceptable behaviours.
- 3. Have a range of ways people can speak up.** It's important that people feel safe to raise concerns about bullying and have more than one person they can talk with, especially if a direct reporting line is involved. These could include a health and safety representative, another manager, a close colleague or an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) counsellor.

Building a truly safe and supportive workplace goes beyond written policies – it's about transforming systems, creating cultures that strengthen your whole team, and boosting morale. All of these practices benefit your organisation as a whole.

11 Tappin, D., Forsyth, D., Gardner, D., Ashby, L., Bentley, T., Bone, K., Catley, B., D'Souza, N., Blackwood, K., Port, Z., Brougham, D., Cordier, J. (2020). The New Zealand Workplace Barometer Psychosocial safety climate and worker health – findings from the 2019 NZ Workplace Barometer. Massey University. <https://mro.massey.ac.nz/items/01fe0a50-15fd-41c4-9aed-83dbace7a6c6>

12 New Zealand Human Rights Commission. (2022). Experiences of workplace bullying and harassment in Aotearoa New Zealand: A nationwide survey for Te Kāhui Tika Tangata, The Human Rights Commission. Te Kāhui Tika Tangata = Human Rights Commission. <https://tikatangata.org.nz/cms/assets/Documents/Reports-and-Inquiry/Employment/Experiences-of-Workplace-Bullying-and-Harassment-in-Aotearoa-New-Zealand.pdf>



Affirming diversity

Studies suggest people who bully are more likely to choose targets who are of a different ethnicity, religion, gender identity or sexual orientation, or those who have a disability.¹³

Here are some useful resources to help you develop policies and procedures that work toward a more diverse and inclusive workplace:

- [Rainbow Rights \(information about the rights of rainbow young people at work\)](#)
- [Inclusive Education \(policies, systems and procedures – for schools but relevant for workplaces\)](#)
- [Te Uru Tāngata \(resources and information supporting inclusive workplaces\)](#)
- [Inclusive Education \(safe, inclusive environments – for schools but relevant for workplaces\)](#)
- [InCommon toolkit to strengthen cross-cultural connections](#)
- [Te Tiriti o Waitangi resources](#)
- [Te Reo Māori resources for the workplace](#)
- [Māori employee experiences in the workplace](#)
- [Creating mentally healthy workplace environments for Māori](#)
- [Sign up for a Māori word of the day or week](#)
- [Open Minds guide for managers](#)

13 Gardner, D., Bentley, T. A., Catley, B. E., Cooper-Thomas, H., O'Driscoll, M. P., & Trenberth, L. (2013). Ethnicity, workplace bullying, social support and psychological strain in Aotearoa/New Zealand. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 42 (2), 84 - 91. <https://mro.massey.ac.nz/handle/10179/9483>

Creating an inclusive environment for rainbow employees

In Aotearoa, people with diverse gender identities, sexualities and/or sex characteristics (such as people who identify as gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, takatāpui and/or non-binary) experience higher rates of bullying. Discrimination and social exclusion based on sexual orientation, sex characteristics, gender identity or gender expression can increase the risk of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts.

Pronouns are words that we use in place of someone's name. The most common pronouns in the English language include he/him, they/them and she/her. Te Reo Māori has gender neutral pronouns, such as ia, as the default. Organisations can work towards a more inclusive workplace for rainbow employees by encouraging all staff to use pronouns correctly.

Sharing your own pronouns and asking others what pronouns they would like you to use when referring to them shows that you are not making assumptions about the language that is correct for them. Below are some tips for using pronouns in the workplace:

- Some people might use different pronouns in different settings, depending on who they are out to. It's important to check in with people on the pronouns they prefer you to use in various settings.
- Practise using neutral language such as 'they' and 'them' if you are not sure what the correct language is for someone.
- If you know a person's correct pronouns, make sure you always use them, even if they are not there to hear it.
- Normalise the sharing of pronouns by adding them to your email signature, sharing them in meetings or including them next to your name in online meetings.

If you accidentally use the incorrect pronouns, don't get defensive, over-apologise, talk about how hard it is to get it right, or avoid practising. Instead, correct yourself and practise using the correct pronouns.

For more advice on how to use pronouns, take a look at these resources from [InsideOUT](#) and [MyPronouns.org](#).

There are other steps that can be taken to create an inclusive environment such as:

- Ensuring your policies and procedures use language that is inclusive of rainbow employees. This includes naming homophobia, transphobia, biphobia and other discrimination on the basis of sex, gender or sexuality as unacceptable behaviour in any bullying or harassment policy.
- Establishing accessible and visible avenues for rainbow employees to share their experiences of your workplace, whether positive or negative, and committing to taking any concerns raised seriously.
- Seeking guidance from external organisations if you wish to receive education or feedback on your rainbow inclusivity, rather than relying on the unpaid labour of rainbow employees.

For further guidance to support you in creating an inclusive environment for the rainbow community, you can get in touch with [RainbowYOUTH](#) or [InsideOUT](#).



How to be an Upstander in the workplace

Two in five workers believe they have experienced workplace bullying in their lifetime.¹⁴ Upstanders are people who notice bullying behaviour and address it to help someone who is being bullied. Bystanders, in contrast, are people who notice bullying behaviour but don't – or cannot – help.

The below Upstander actions can be used by both leaders and employees in the workplace to help them take safe and effective action when they see bullying take place.

Āwhinatia / Support the person experiencing bullying:

- Tautoko the person being bullied, even if you just stand beside them and let them know you've got their back.
- Encourage the person being bullied to ask for help. Go with them to get help or provide them with information about where to go for help.
- Share our '[Getting help and advice](#)' webpage with them.
- Let them know they're not alone and you're there for them.



Haukotia / Distract:

- Interrupt the bullying in some way.
- Ask the person experiencing bullying if they want to go for a walk or do something else.
- Help them to leave the situation they're in.

Kaua e tautoko i aua momo whanonga / Don't support or engage in the behaviour:

- Make it clear to your colleagues that you won't be involved in bullying behaviour.
- Don't encourage bullying behaviour by harassing, teasing or spreading gossip about others, verbally or on social networking sites.
- Don't acknowledge, reply or forward messages or photos that could be hurtful or embarrassing to a colleague.

Karangahia / Call it:

- If you feel safe to do so, let those doing the bullying know that it isn't okay. It can be hard to speak up in the moment, but saying something like 'that's not okay' can make a big difference.
- Use your words to show aroha and kindness to those involved.

Taihoa ake, ka haumaruru / Leave and act:

- If you don't feel safe to intervene, it's best to take a breath and think about what you can do to help.
- Later you might want to talk to the person being bullied and ask what might help, or have a quiet word with the person displaying the bullying behaviour.

Tautokohia / Get some other help:

- You might want to go with the person who is being bullied to your human resources department or their relevant manager.
- Tell a trusted manager or colleague what you have seen, and ask them to check in with the person who has been bullied.
- If your organisation has policies around bullying prevention, this might help you figure out what to do next and who is best to talk to.

Clear policies and practices, known and shared values and expected behaviours, and leaders who role model these values/behaviours, will help people feel confident to be an Upstander at work.

¹⁴ Kantar. (2022). Experiences of workplace bullying and harassment in aotearoa: A nationwide survey for the Human Rights Commission. Human Rights Commission. <https://www.hrc.co.nz/new-research-shows-high-prevalence-workplace-bullying-and-harassment/>.

When Upstanders are confident to take safe and effective action to support the person experiencing bullying, there is a greater possibility that bullying can stop.

For more information about how to be an Upstander, click [here](#).

Further advice for employees who experience bullying at work

There are a range of services and resources available to employees who experience bullying at work:

- If your workplace has an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), you may like to talk to this service about the bullying, and how it is affecting you and your options. This service is confidential.
- Employees can advise their employer that they have experienced bullying behaviour using [WorkSafe's reporting and assessment forms](#).
- They can also access the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment's [Early Resolution Service](#). This is a free phone-based service which helps workplaces to resolve issues early, quickly and informally.
- Employment New Zealand has advice on steps employees can take if they [feel bullied in the workplace](#).
- Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission's [dispute resolution service](#) provides employees with confidential, free and fair support for anyone who has, or suspects that they have, experienced unlawful discrimination on the basis of any protected aspects of their identity (including sex, gender or sexual orientation).

Team exercises

Embrace diversity through kōrero

We know that embracing diversity and allowing people to bring their whole selves to work can help create a mentally healthy workplace culture that has zero tolerance for bullying.

One way you can celebrate diversity in your team is by getting to know each other and connecting with curiosity. When we get to know each other as whole people and not just as job roles, we develop respect and trust. Our kōrero starter card activity is an easy way to begin a kōrero and learn more about your colleagues. Download the activity [here](#).

Why not try this activity over morning tea or to start/end your team meeting? By giving each other our time and attention, we make an investment in our relationships and help to build a safe, supportive and strong workplace.



Bullying prevention quiz

Challenge your workplace with this [bullying prevention quiz](#). This quiz draws on up-to-date research, and is designed to support discussion around how to prevent bullying and create inclusive workplaces.



The triple filter test

The triple filter test can be used as a filter to stop rumours from circulating within the workplace and as a reflective tool for any interactions people are having. Before we talk about someone else (whether about their work, their behaviour or something else), there are three questions we can ask ourselves:

- Is it true?
- Is it good or kind?
- Is it useful?

Using our worksheet, people are encouraged to reflect on a recent interaction when they may have relayed information about someone else or when they have had a conversation that didn't go well. This exercise can be done in a team meeting or individually.

Download the worksheet [here](#).

Values and behaviours

Organisational values set the scene for the way people are expected to behave at work. Taking time to talk with your team about what those values are and what the expected behaviours look like is a great way to create shared understandings. This will also help people recognise when those behaviours are not happening and to act as an Upstander.

This [worksheet](#) contains exercises to help your people understand your organisation's values and how they are expected to behave at work.



Getting help and advice

For more information about bullying at work, take a look at this [resource from WorkSafe](#). Managers and employers can access best practice guidelines with WorkSafe's '[Preventing and responding to bullying at work](#)' resource.

For workplaces

WorkSafe NZ

A suite of resources to support businesses.

Te Uru Tāngata

Contact 0800 348 377 or email info@workplaceinclusion.org.nz

The national body shaping fairer, more connected workplaces where everyone can thrive.

For individuals

If you are experiencing bullying, you can get help and advice here:

WorkSafe NZ

Advice about bullying at work.

Employment Relations Authority

For general queries on employment relations.

Citizen's Advice Bureau – 0800 367 222

For information and advice.

Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission

Contact 0800 496 877 or email infoline@hrc.co.nz

Their purpose is to promote and protect the human rights of all people in Aotearoa.

Head to their website for advice or to [make a complaint](#) about discrimination.

Find support around sexuality or gender identity

OutLine Aotearoa

0800 688 5463 (0800 OUTLINE) from 6pm-9pm

Confidential, free, all ages rainbow support line, online chat and peer support. Phone the above number to speak to a trained volunteer, or visit the website to use the online chat service.

RainbowYOUTH

Contact RainbowYOUTH via this [form](#).

Offers support for rainbow youth aged 13 - 27.

InsideOUT

Contact InsideOUT via this [form](#).

Offers speakers, consulting and staff training on rainbow diversity and inclusion in workplaces and schools.

Mental Health Foundation resources

Working Well

Resources to help organisations create a culture that prioritises the mental health and wellbeing of their employees.

Open Minds

Online training materials and information to equip managers with the tools and confidence to talk about mental health.

Pink Shirt Day

A national bullying prevention campaign which reminds us of the power of coming together to prevent bullying, harassment, and discrimination in Aotearoa.

Visit mentalhealth.org.nz/workplaces for more workplace support, resources and information.

