SPACE TO BREATHE THERAPY

Each Cut May Be Deniable. The Cumulative Harm Is Not.

Being Repeatedly Interrupted

Everyone gets interrupted occasionally. The cumulative harm begins when interruption becomes a pattern that consistently reduces one person's opportunity to finish, explain, disagree or be heard.

Why the small things can become big things

A single awkward meeting, missed invitation or poorly handled conversation does not automatically mean that somebody is being bullied, discriminated against or deliberately undermined. Context matters. But repetition matters too. When the same experience happens again and again, a person may start anticipating it before it occurs. They may become quieter, hyper-alert, over-prepared or reluctant to ask questions. The harm can therefore come not only from the individual incidents, but from the adaptation required to survive the pattern.

This is why cumulative harm can be difficult to explain. Each event may have a plausible explanation when viewed alone. The more useful question is often: **what does the whole pattern look like, and what is it doing to the person experiencing it?**

What this pattern might look like

• People regularly speak over you before you finish.

• Your points are redirected or closed down more quickly than other people's.

• You rush your speech because you expect to lose the floor.

• You leave meetings knowing you did not say what you needed to say.

The impact can travel beyond the moment

People can begin to question their competence, replay conversations, monitor other people's reactions or work harder in an attempt to prevent criticism. Some withdraw; others become increasingly driven and exhausted. A person may still appear highly capable while using far more emotional and cognitive energy than colleagues can see. None of these responses proves wrongdoing by somebody else, but they are important information about the sustainability of the working environment.

Personal reflection — looking at the whole picture

You do not have to answer these questions all at once. They are here to help you slow the experience down and separate what happened from the story you may have been forced to tell yourself about it.

- **What do I notice in my body when I am interrupted?**

_____

_____

- **Do I rush, freeze, lose my train of thought or withdraw?**

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_____

- **Whose voices are given room and whose are routinely cut short?**

_____

_____

- **What sentence could help me reclaim my turn without escalating the situation?**

_____

_____

- **Would structured meeting practices make participation safer?**

_____

_____

A personal note

Sometimes we minimise the small things because each one seems too minor to justify making a fuss. But I would encourage you to look at the whole picture. If you have gradually become quieter, more anxious before work, less trusting of your own judgement or increasingly exhausted by trying to get things right, that matters. You do not have to prove that every individual moment was terrible before you acknowledge what the pattern is doing to you.

What can I do?

The aim is not to force you into confrontation. It is to give you choices. Start with the safest and most proportionate step for your circumstances.

Start by naming the pattern, not diagnosing the person

Try to describe observable behaviour: what happened, when, who was present, what was expected, and what effect it had. You do not need to know another person's motive before you are allowed to notice an impact.

Keep a factual record

A dated record can help when experiences blur together. Note what happened, how it affected you or the work, any witnesses, and relevant emails or messages. Acas specifically recommends keeping a record when someone believes they are being bullied or discriminated against.

Consider an informal conversation where it feels safe

Some problems can be addressed early through a calm conversation with the person involved, a manager, or another trusted workplace contact. Be specific about the behaviour and the change you are asking for. Informal resolution is not appropriate in every situation, particularly where you feel unsafe or there is a serious allegation.

Use the structures around you

Depending on your workplace this might include a line manager, another manager, HR, a trade union representative, occupational health, an employee assistance programme, a disability or wellbeing lead, or a formal grievance process.

Ask for practical change

A useful conversation moves beyond 'this is upsetting me' to 'this is what would make the situation workable'. Examples might include clearer priorities, structured meeting turn-taking, written instructions, regular but proportionate check-ins, quieter working arrangements, accessible communication or a review of workload.

If disability is relevant

Reasonable adjustments are changes intended to remove or reduce disability-related disadvantage. Acas advises that adjustments should be individual, recorded and reviewed as circumstances change. If an agreed adjustment is not working, asking for a review can be an important next step.

When the situation is affecting your health

Persistent workplace stress deserves attention. Speak with an appropriate health professional when you are concerned about your physical or mental health. Occupational health may also be useful where available. Urgent or crisis support should be used if you are at immediate risk.

Prepare for a workplace conversation

What I have noticed: _____

Two or three clear examples: _____

The effect on my work or wellbeing: _____

The change I am asking for: _____

When we will review it: _____

If you are unsure whether this is bullying, discrimination or poor management

You do not have to decide on a legal label before seeking advice. Acas guidance recognises that something which feels like bullying may sometimes be legitimate management, while bullying can also be unintentional. Focus first on the behaviour, pattern and impact. If protected characteristics, disability, harassment, victimisation or reasonable adjustments may be involved, obtain appropriate employment advice rather than relying on this resource alone.

Useful UK support routes

Acas — independent workplace information and advice, including bullying, discrimination, grievances and reasonable adjustments.
Trade union — representation and advice if you are a member.
HR / another manager — internal policy, informal resolution or formal processes.
Occupational health — work-and-health assessment and recommendations where available.
Employee Assistance Programme — confidential wellbeing support where your employer provides one.
GP or other health professional — if work is affecting your physical or mental health.

Important

This is an educational and reflective resource, not legal, medical or employment advice. Workplace circumstances vary. If you believe you are being discriminated against, harassed, bullied, subjected to retaliation, or placed at risk, seek advice appropriate to your situation and be aware that employment processes and legal claims can have time limits.

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