PUBLIC UNDERMINING

When jokes, put-downs or corrections erode confidence in front of others

Each cut may be deniable. The cumulative harm is not.

One incident may have an innocent explanation. This guide is about what happens when similar experiences repeat, the person adapts around them and the cumulative effect begins to alter confidence, safety, health or ability to work.

Understanding the pattern

Workplace harm is not always loud. It can develop through ordinary-looking moments that are individually easy to dismiss. Looking at repetition does not mean assuming malicious intent. It means asking whether a consistent pattern exists, what effect it is having, and whether reasonable action has been taken once the issue is known.

What it can look like

- Jokes repeatedly land on one person after discomfort has been shown.
- Corrections are delivered humiliatingly when a private conversation would be appropriate.
- Competence is questioned publicly rather than discussing the specific work.
- 'Can't you take a joke?' or 'you're too sensitive' redirects attention onto the recipient.
- Eye-rolling, mimicry or dismissive gestures accompany contributions.
- The person is interrupted or contradicted more aggressively than peers.

A useful test

Ask: if I remove the explanations and simply list what happened over time, what pattern can I see? Then ask what changed after the concern was raised.

Why cumulative harm feels different

The brain does not experience repeated workplace stress as a set of completely separate events. When something keeps happening, prediction begins. The person may enter meetings already braced, check messages repeatedly, rehearse conversations, mask discomfort or work harder to prevent criticism.

Possible emotional and behavioural effects

- Dreading meetings.
- Speaking less to avoid attention.
- Replaying comments afterwards.
- Loss of confidence and trust.
- Reduced willingness to contribute ideas.
- Feeling exposed in front of colleagues or clients.

The body and nervous system

Public experiences carry an audience. That can intensify shame and make the person monitor not only the speaker but everyone else's reaction. Even apparently small remarks can accumulate into a strong expectation of embarrassment.

You may also notice

- muscle tension, headaches or stomach discomfort around work
- difficulty sleeping before particular days or meetings
- feeling exhausted after apparently small interactions
- irritability or tearfulness after holding things together at work
- difficulty concentrating because attention is being used to monitor risk
- needing longer to recover after the working day

Impact is information

A stress response does not by itself prove wrongdoing. It does tell us that the situation is costing the person something and deserves careful, proportionate attention.

Neurodivergence, masking and cumulative strain

Neurodivergent employees can be especially affected by patterns involving ambiguity, indirect communication, inconsistent expectations, social exclusion or repeated boundary breaches. Some people rely on predictability and explicit information to work effectively; others may spend substantial energy decoding implied meaning or masking distress.

What may be happening underneath

- replaying conversations to work out what was meant
- taking vague criticism literally and trying to correct everything at once
- masking discomfort so successfully that others underestimate the impact
- using extra unpaid time to compensate for unclear expectations
- shutdown, withdrawal or reduced speech after prolonged stress
- appearing 'fine' in the moment and experiencing the impact later at home

Reasonable adjustments and access

Where disability is relevant, practical adjustments might include written instructions, clearer priorities, predictable contact routes, advance agendas, written follow-up, reduced ambiguity, a named point of contact or support in difficult meetings. Adjustments should respond to the person's functional needs rather than stereotypes about a diagnosis.

Do not confuse clarity with inflexibility

Asking for expectations, boundaries or communication to be explicit can be an access need and can also improve work for the whole team.

Record enough to see the pattern

A record should reduce confusion, not become another full-time job. Capture the clearest examples and the practical impact. Keep factual observations separate from conclusions about motive.

What to capture

- date, time and context
- what was said or done as accurately as possible
- who was present or copied into communication
- what you did in response
- whether you had previously raised the same issue
- what follow-up was promised
- what actually happened afterwards
- impact on your work, access, confidence or health

Date	Event / evidence	Response	Impact / follow-up
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

Keep evidence in proportion

Save relevant emails, messages, meeting notes or work records. Avoid secretly recording conversations unless you understand the workplace and legal implications. Written notes made promptly after an event can still help you remember detail.

Raising it without having to prove intent

A strong workplace conversation can focus on behaviour, pattern, impact and requested change. This avoids getting trapped in an argument about whether somebody 'meant' to cause harm.

Words you can adapt

I am comfortable receiving feedback, including difficult feedback, but repeated jokes and comments about my competence in front of others are affecting my ability to contribute. I would like performance feedback to be specific and, where appropriate, private, and I need comments I have identified as uncomfortable to stop.

A four-part structure

- **Behaviour:** describe what has happened in observable terms.
- **Pattern:** explain that similar incidents have happened repeatedly.
- **Impact:** describe the practical and wellbeing effect.
- **Request:** state the specific change, clarification or follow-up you need.

If you have already raised it

Say what happened after the earlier conversation. Was an action agreed? Was there a date? Did the behaviour change briefly and return? Did the focus move from the concern onto your personality or reaction? A repeated failure to close the loop can become part of the cumulative experience.

If speaking feels difficult

- take a short written summary
- ask for an agenda or questions in advance
- request written follow-up
- take an appropriate representative or supporter where permitted
- ask for communication adjustments if disability or neurodivergence affects the process

The aim is a workable next step

You do not need the other person to agree with every part of your interpretation before practical changes can be considered.

For managers, HR and people receiving the concern

The most helpful response is neither instant agreement nor instant defence. It is a fair process: listen, clarify, look across incidents, check relevant evidence, explain decisions and follow through.

What helps in this situation

- Name the behaviour rather than debating 'banter'.
- Consider impact as well as intent.
- Set respectful meeting standards.
- Intervene early.
- Give specific private feedback where public correction is unnecessary.

Common unhelpful responses

- 'I'm sure they didn't mean it' - intent does not answer what happened or what needs to change.
- 'No one else has complained' - absence of another report is information, not proof.
- 'Try not to take it personally' - may increase self-doubt without addressing the pattern.
- 'That's just how they are' - normalises behaviour instead of assessing its impact.
- 'Let's move on' - can close the conversation before actions are agreed.

Questions for an organisational review

- Are similar incidents visible across time?
- Are comparable employees treated consistently?
- What happened after earlier concerns?
- Could workload, role ambiguity or informal culture be contributing?
- Are confidentiality and access being handled appropriately?
- What concrete action, owner and review date can now be agreed?

Psychological safety is built through follow-through

People learn whether it is safe to speak from what happens after they speak. A clear outcome, even when it is not the outcome they wanted, is usually safer than silence or indefinite uncertainty.

Reflection and action workbook

1. What is the pattern?

The behaviour or situation I keep noticing is:

The three clearest examples are:

What I know as fact is:

What I am interpreting or unsure about is:

2. What is the cumulative impact?

At work I have started to:

In my body or emotions I notice:

At home or outside work the impact is:

What I am doing to cope or mask it is:

3. What would improve this?

The behaviour or process I need to change is:

The support/adjustment I need is:

Who I will speak to:

The date I will review progress:

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

You are allowed to look at the whole picture

When something keeps happening, it can be confusing because every individual moment may come with an explanation. You may even find yourself explaining it away before anybody else does.

Try to come back to what you can observe: what happened, how often, what you communicated, what changed afterwards and what the cumulative effect has been on you. You do not need to label another person or prove their intentions in order to ask for clarity, respect, fair process or support.

The purpose of noticing the pattern is not to keep you focused on every hurt. It is to help you understand enough of the picture to decide what needs to happen next.

UK support and routes

- ACAS - workplace concerns, grievances, bullying, discrimination and reasonable adjustments.
- GOV.UK - employment rights, disability and whistleblowing information.
- Equality and Human Rights Commission - Equality Act 2010 employment guidance.
- Occupational health - where available, for health impact and workplace recommendations.
- Trade union or professional body - where applicable, for representation or advice.

Books and further reading

- **The Fearless Organization** - Amy C. Edmondson: psychological safety and speaking up.
- **Dare to Lead** - Brene Brown: leadership, difficult conversations and organisational courage.
- **Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before?** - Dr Julie Smith: practical psychological tools for stress and emotional wellbeing.

Important note

This is educational workplace wellbeing information. It does not determine whether conduct legally constitutes bullying, harassment, discrimination, victimisation or another legal issue and does not replace tailored employment, legal, union, HR or medical advice.

When health is being affected

If work is significantly affecting your mental or physical health, consider speaking with your GP or another appropriate health professional alongside workplace support. Seek urgent help where there is immediate risk of harm.

Sources used for further guidance

ACAS workplace guidance; GOV.UK employment and disability guidance; Equality and Human Rights Commission employment guidance; Edmondson, A. C., research on psychological safety.