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Unprofessional behaviour between healthcare staff: drivers and solutions

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Background

About this guide

This evidence-based guide is informed by a project funded by the NIHR. We undertook an extensive review of evidence, drawing on 148 UK and international sources, including reports of 42 interventions. The research focused on acute settings, but many of the findings are relevant to other healthcare environments.

The review aimed to answer two questions: **what leads to unprofessional behaviours taking place** and **what we can do about it**.

What are unprofessional behaviours?

Our working definition of **unprofessional behaviours** is any interpersonal behaviour by a staff member that acutely or frequently undermines, humiliates, intimidates, or causes distress or harm to other staff, in the healthcare workplace.

How do these behaviours affect people?

Unprofessional co-worker behaviours have a serious impact on people throughout healthcare, including:

Staff by damaging psychological and physical health. This is true not only for those on the receiving end of the behaviours, but for colleagues who witness the behaviours.

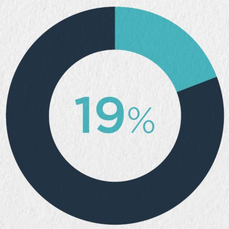
Organisations by reducing staff morale, resulting in problems with retention, reducing patient safety, and loss of reputation.

Patients by affecting staff confidence to report clinical errors, poor patient experiences, and concerns around care quality and safety. Staff who do not feel psychologically safe are less likely to share their mistakes.

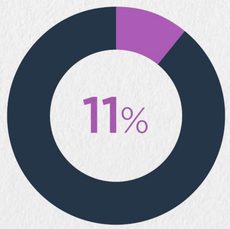
How prevalent are these behaviours?

The latest NHS Staff Survey shows us how common these behaviours are:

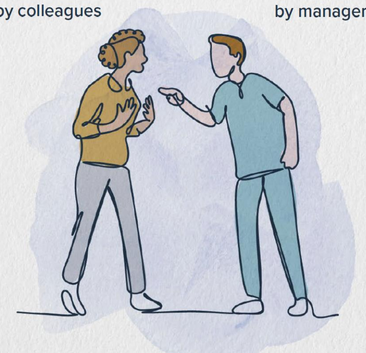
Staff who experienced harassment, bullying or abuse:[2]



by colleagues



by managers



9%

of staff from ethnic minority backgrounds reported experiencing discrimination at work by managers or colleagues[3]

23%

of white respondents

28%

of black or minority ethnic respondents experienced harassment, bullying, or abuse from colleagues

What are the drivers of unprofessional behaviour?

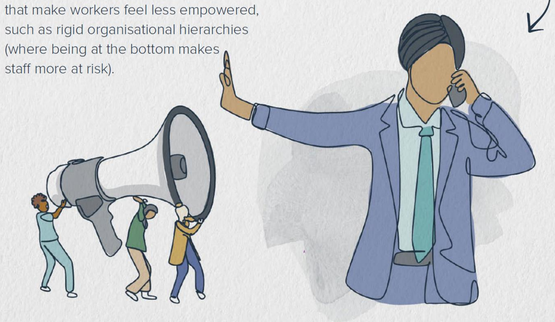
Many organisations assume that unprofessionalism is caused by a few so-called 'bad apples'. But often, we see a range of long-term organisational and systemic issues that seem to contribute to these behaviours. Examples of these workplace features that increase the risk of unprofessional behaviours are shown below.

Workplace disempowerment

This relates to organisational features that make workers feel less empowered, such as rigid organisational hierarchies (where being at the bottom makes staff more at risk).

Harmful workplace processes and cultures

These may include factors such as high job demands and lack of resources, pressure, lack of clarity around roles, poor leadership, poor role models, authoritarian leadership style, cliques, unfair processes, and a lack of leadership accountability.



Inhibited social cohesion

This comprises a lack of social support from colleagues, leading to an inability to:

- cope with unprofessional behaviours
- share experiences and communicate effectively.

Reduced ability to speak up

This can be the result of organisational deafness (where reports about poor conduct are not listened to), witnessing whistleblowers being punished, or inaction after someone speaks up. It may also result from factors outlined above; for example, being disempowered can inhibit the ability for staff to speak up.

Lack of manager awareness and urgency

Sometimes, managers can lack awareness of unprofessional behaviours or they may not feel any urgency to address them. This can be in response to few staff speaking up, poor leadership, and organisations being unaware of concerns raised.

How do these drivers work?

Context	Mechanisms			Outcomes
Workplace disempowerment	1 Increased likelihood for staff to engage in unprofessional behaviours	2 Reduced ability for staff to cope with unprofessional behaviours	3 Reduced ability to report, challenge or address unprofessional behaviours	Increased presence of unprofessional behaviours
Harmful workplace processes and cultures				Reduced patient safety
Lack of manager awareness and urgency				Impacts to staff wellbeing
Reduced ability to speak up				Poor care quality and experience
Inhibited social cohesion				

How do I address unprofessional behaviours?

To find out more, **download our FREE guide**!

Available at:

https://workforceresearchsurrey.health/