

Workplace conflict - Q & A

This article lists a range of questions on workplace conflict which were posted by visitors to the Better Health Channel. Our experts provide the answers.

Q. I enjoy my work and take it seriously but find it hard to relate to my workmates. They annoy me and don't work enough.

If you are unable to cope with your workmates, there could be several reasons, including:

- You are in a completely incompatible work group in terms of values or identity.
- You generally find it difficult to be assertive and keep boundaries, and your workmates sense and exploit this.
- You generally find it difficult to connect with people at work, putting work completely ahead of the work relationships.
- You have got a group of dysfunctional and insensitive people to work with, who just want to make life difficult for you and anyone else. If this is the case, your options include reduced exposure to these people, appropriate advice from personnel, or a change of work environment.

Q. I work in a small office and one of my colleagues hardly does anything. She is young and flirts with the boss, and he doesn't notice that she doesn't do anything. The rest of us are left to pick up her slack. I am only casual and don't want to complain because I am worried about my job.

This is tricky. The safest thing to do is to stop protecting her and stop picking up the slack (in the nicest possible way, of course). You need to be united on this. If the boss wants to know why X, Y and Z aren't being done properly, you all need to be able to demonstrate your diligence and clearly sign off on all your work requirements.

If the boss still doesn't get it and demands that you fix up X, Y or Z, you can reasonably ask which of your other tasks you could drop in order to fulfil this request. Of course, you should make sure you have a whiteboard or calendar that maps your workload, so it is clear you are all working to capacity. Remain as mystified as your colleagues why certain things are not being achieved in the office.

Q. I am supervised by a person who was promoted over me, but who has lesser qualifications and experience. I cannot respect this person in the supervisory position she has over me. Apart from leaving my job, I can't see any other way I can get on with her. I've tried all sorts of things, counselling included, but she is just plain stupid!

The situation you describe is a difficult one. Presumably, you have asked for feedback on the selection process and there is now no likely mileage in pursuing any review or appeal of the selection panel's decision. Hence, there are limited options. There are three areas to consider.

Professional strategies

The first area concerns the management of interaction with your supervisor in the workplace. This option would often involve clarifying and agreeing on preferred communication styles and approaches, and developing protocols for managing disagreements and conflict. A third party, such as a Human Resources officer or external consultant, would often manage this process in consultation with you and your current supervisor. Another option would be to look at any possibilities for implementing alternative reporting arrangements - for example, you negotiate reporting to a different manager to minimise direct interactions with your supervisor. It would also be worth discussing your situation openly with a senior manager or Human Resources manager to see if they have any other suggestions.

Personal coping tips

The second area concerns your personal coping. Understandably, a major source of your stress is the frustration you feel when you compare how your supervisor performs and deals with situations, with how you would perform and handle the same situations. If there are no other options that seem viable or appealing at present, you will need to learn how to modify your views and thoughts about the situation. This might involve:

- Further working through your sense of injustice that you should have got the job over the current incumbent.
- Learning to accept the situation and bide your time until an opportunity comes around again for you to apply for a supervisor's position or the current incumbent changes roles.
- Learning to control 'stewing' over your perception of unfairness about your current work situation.

There are specific coping skills that can be learned which would help improve your tolerance and reduce your stress level. If your workplace has an Employee Assistance Program, you can seek assistance through that program. If this is the service through which you previously accessed counselling, contact the service again and ask to consult a different counsellor. Practitioners who have formal training in cognitive-behavioural therapy techniques are likely to be the most helpful in terms of learning these types of specific coping skills.

Getting out

The third area, which you have noted, involves deciding to change job roles. If, you think there are no further or viable possibilities to improve your personal coping skills or manage your interaction with the supervisor in the workplace, there is no other option but to look at changing jobs.

Q. Management recently decided that three teams on separate projects would be combined into two. However, the selection process was very uneven so Team 1 has strength while Team 2 is struggling. This has been obvious to all involved but the manager. Morale appears to be low at this point. How can this be turned around to benefit all affected?

In an ideal world, you would have an open discussion with the manager, who would then go back to the drawing board and start again with the selection process to achieve a better balance between the teams. This would be the most effective way to improve staff morale. We know that the strongest influences on staff morale are:

- Supportive leadership - that is, treating staff with respect, being accessible and responsive to staff concerns, and engaging staff
- The clarity of job roles and performance expectations
- The overall quality of the organisational climate.

Given that the process of collapsing three teams into two does not appear to have been managed very well, it will be difficult to improve morale without addressing this issue.

Q. I am a health professional who has suffered depression for a few years. I am receiving counselling and medication and have reduced my workload, but I still find myself getting stressed by work. I worry sometimes that I'm not performing to an adequate standard but people seem to think I can judge for myself whether I am fit to work or not.

'Counselling' covers a wide range of approaches and we know that some of the more focused and structured approaches, such as cognitive-behavioural therapy, are particularly effective with depression. It may be worth discussing with your counsellor whether you should supplement your current counselling with these more specialised techniques.

Since you have reduced your workload, your colleagues seem supportive, and there is some flexibility in your work arrangements, it is likely to help if you learn to better manage negative thoughts and anticipations about your ability to cope and perform at work.

There are a number of specific and fine-grained techniques to assist in learning to control these negative thoughts, and they need to be carefully targeted in consultation with a suitably skilled mental health professional. Clinical psychologists and psychiatrists have formal training in these techniques, and a number of other psychologists, GPs and some other mental health professionals also have some skills in this area. I suggest accessing these techniques with your counsellor.

Q. I do not get along with colleagues in my office and my boss sometimes does not treat me equally. I am isolated and not respected, even by some junior staff members. I am a hardworking person and people in other offices have all appreciated my hard work. I did nothing wrong and I am an easy-going person. I have started overeating to get pleasure. I eat even when I am not hungry, and in secret to avoid worrying my parents. I'm afraid of getting fat, so I use laxatives every day - without them, I feel insecure and suffer from constipation. I am deeply depressed even though I can share my problems with my friends and boyfriend.

It is important that you seek some assistance, as there is a risk that both the work hassles and eating problems may get worse. Often, the type of work hassles you describe can lead to feelings of alienation and ongoing isolation, and then progress to depression. Similarly, although the eating behaviours may have developed as a reaction to these hassles, they can take on a life of their own.

I suggest you seek some professional help. This will get you on track with strategies and techniques to change the eating behaviours, and begin to address the workplace issues.

Firstly, check if your workplace has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), which is an employer-funded program through which staff may seek confidential short term counselling and advice. Most large employers have EAPs but, if your workplace does not, you could seek a referral from your GP to a clinical psychologist or other psychologist or health professional who works in these areas.

Where to get help

- Your employer
- Your union
- Human Resources manager
- Employee Assistance Program at your workplace
- Career counsellor
- Association of Careers Counsellors Tel. 1800 222 390
- Centrelink Tel. 132 490
- Job Network Information Line Tel. 1300 363 365
- Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) Tel. (03) 9920 4777
- The Australian Psychological Society Tel. (03) 8662 3300
- Australian Psychological Society Referral Line Tel. 1800 333 497

Want to know more?

Go to [More information for support groups](#), related links and references.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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