

A survivor's guide to academic bullying

To the editor — Early-career researchers, and particularly those who come from under-represented groups in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), are susceptible to bullying. However, they can arm themselves with awareness and be prepared for abusive behaviour on the part of superiors within the academic hierarchy.

I was a target of academic bullying, but I am also a survivor. After I started writing on academic bullying^{1,2} and established a non-profit organization to increase awareness among stakeholders (<https://paritymovement.org/>), I was overwhelmed with email correspondence and phone calls from others who had been targeted or who had observed this phenomenon. Based on this correspondence and my own experience, I learned some key lessons that targets of academic bullying can employ to protect themselves and fight back.

First, try to document and record your interactions, including the abusive behaviour. This can be accomplished by saving emails, writing memos to document verbal conversations, or making sure to have conversations in the presence of a trusted ally.

Second, consult your institution's ombudsperson or mediation office. The professionals there, trained in dealing with harassment and bullying, will listen to your issue and offer guidance. Often they do not have the power to act on your behalf, but they can advise you on the best course of action.

One important piece of advice, after you speak up, is to insist that the institution provide a summary letter of their findings on your complaint case. With that in place, if any future employer has a question about what happened, you have evidence that your claims were upheld by an investigation and there was no wrongdoing on your part. However, be aware that such a summary may also include negative, unsubstantiated or biased testimony regarding your own actions, which could damage your reputation.

Third, look for others who might be experiencing the same situation but are afraid of speaking up. Band together, document your stories and amass evidence. It is much more difficult for an institution to ignore or brush away the concerns of multiple researchers who present their case together.

Fourth, have an exit strategy in mind, ideally in advance. This may be another position in a different laboratory group, department or even institution. Importantly, this may mean cultivating other mentors and collaborators well in advance so that you can ask them for recommendation letters.

Starting the moment you decide to speak up, you should be prepared for retaliation—and it might come from unexpected sources and colleagues. Think through all the potential consequences of speaking up, which may range from tainting your reputation to being fired. Even a well-founded complaint documenting

a clear history of abuse may elicit strong institutional resistance.

And my last piece of advice: remind yourself that you are a target, not a victim. Just like targets of sexual harassment, you did nothing wrong to bring on this bad behaviour, and it is not your fault. It is important to remember that you got to your position by hard work and scientific talent. Have confidence to stand up to your bully—by finding allies, drawing on institutional resources and reclaiming your rights.

Ultimately, of course, the only effective way to stop the chain of academic bullying is for the entire scientific workforce to decide that bullying will no longer be tolerated in our workplaces. □

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References

1. Mahmoudi, M. *Nature* **562**, 494 (2018).
2. Mahmoudi, M. *Lancet* **394**, 1410 (2019).

Competing interests

M.M. is co-founder and director of Academic Parity Movement, a non-profit organization dedicated to addressing academic discrimination, violence and bullying.