

How to Respond to Adult Bullies Without Losing Yourself

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Adult bullying is on the rise — in workplaces, families, communities, and online. And when it happens to you, it can feel shocking, destabilising, and deeply personal. Bullies don't just target your behaviour. They go after your confidence, your dignity, and your sense of safety.

But here's the truth:

You don't have to match a bully's aggression to protect yourself. You don't have to shrink to stay safe. You don't have to lose yourself to survive them.

There is a middle ground — a grounded, steady, assertive way of responding that keeps *you* in control.

Let's walk through it.

1. First, understand this: bullying is never your fault

When someone targets you with criticism, intimidation, or hostility, your first instinct is often to question yourself:

- "Did I do something wrong?"
- "Did I cause this?"
- "Should I have handled it differently?"

Bullies rely on this self-doubt. They make it personal — attacking your intelligence, competence, appearance, or sanity — because it destabilises you.

But bullying is not about you. It's about *them* — their lack of emotional regulation, their need for control, their inability to handle discomfort, or their learned patterns of dominance. You didn't cause it. You didn't deserve it. You're not responsible for fixing it.

Remind yourself:

- “No one deserves to be bullied.”
- “This behaviour is about them, not me.”
- “I don’t have to justify myself to someone who is trying to intimidate me.”

This mindset shift is the foundation of assertiveness.

2. Don’t respond aggressively — it gives the bully ammunition

When someone attacks you, your nervous system fires up. You may feel the urge to:

- yell
- defend yourself intensely
- threaten back
- “Teach them a lesson”

But aggression often backfires.

Bullies are skilled at flipping the narrative. If you react emotionally, they point to **your** behaviour as the problem. Suddenly, you’re painted as the aggressor — and they get to play the victim.

You don’t need to fight fire with fire. You need to stay steady.

3. Don’t freeze or stay passive — it encourages repeat behaviour

The other common response is to shut down:

- staying silent
- avoiding eye contact
- hoping it will stop
- trying to be “nice” to de-escalate

But passivity often emboldens a bully. If they see you freeze, they learn they can get away with it — and sometimes they enjoy the power it gives them.

You don’t need to collapse. You need to interrupt the pattern.

4. Respond assertively — short, steady, and simple

Assertiveness is not aggression. It’s not passivity. It’s the calm middle ground.

Assertiveness sounds like:

- “That’s enough.”
- “I’m not engaging with you like this.”
- “We’ll have to agree to disagree.”
- “Do not speak to me that way.”
- “Stop.”

Short. Clear. Neutral. No explanations. No emotional struggle.

You're not trying to win. You're setting a boundary.

Practice these phrases with someone you trust so they come naturally when you need them.

5. If it's not safe, your only job is to get away

If the bully has a history of violence, volatility, or unpredictable behaviour, assertiveness may not be safe. In those situations, your priority is:

- physical safety
- emotional safety
- getting distance
- seeking support

You don't owe a bully a perfect response. You owe yourself protection.

6. Don't isolate — bullies count on your silence

One of the most dangerous effects of bullying is isolation. People often feel ashamed, embarrassed, or afraid to tell someone what's happening.

But silence is where bullying grows.

Talk to:

- a trusted friend
- a family member

- a therapist
- a coach
- a union rep
- HR (with caution- be prepared with documentation)
- a lawyer if needed
- You're not "making a big deal." You're protecting yourself.
- Connection restores clarity. Isolation feeds confusion.

7. Get help — you don't have to handle this alone

- Many organisations have:
- HR teams
- ombudspeople
- employee assistance programs
- union representatives
- reporting pathways

But here's the truth:

Bullies often "kiss up and kick down."

They charm those above them and target those below.

This is why speaking to someone *outside* the organisation first can help you strategize safely.

If you're a bystander, you can also interrupt bullying with a simple phrase:

- "That's enough."
- "Leave her alone."
- "We're not doing this."

Small interventions can shift power dynamics.

8. Remember: you have the right to set limits

You are allowed to:

- speak up
- walk away
- set boundaries
- get help
- refuse to be spoken to disrespectfully
- protect your mental health
- remove yourself from unsafe dynamics
- You don't need permission. You don't need to justify it. You don't need to tolerate cruelty to keep the peace.
- You can respond to a bully without losing yourself.
- **And that is YOUR POWER.**

A Gentle Invitation

If this article helped you feel steadier or gave you language you've been missing, you're welcome to reach out when you feel ready. You don't need perfect words — just honesty. I read every message myself, and I respond with care, not pressure. When the moment feels right, you can send me a note and I'll meet you there.

References (APA 7th Edition)

American Psychiatric Association. (2022). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed., text rev.; DSM-5-TR). American Psychiatric Publishing.

