

Preparation for Sexual Harassment

Each society has unwritten standards of behavior that include how physically close we can be to one another before someone begins to feel uncomfortable. These boundaries are particularly important between men and women in the workplace, where a touch that breaches this invisible barrier may be considered harassment. Other forms of harassment can include verbal belittling or comments about appearance. Federal law says that such behavior, if it is “severe or pervasive” and affects working conditions or continued employment, may constitute harassment.

The idea of sexual harassment began in the 1970s with the rise of feminism and more women in the workplace. Recently, the #MeToo movement has brought more attention to the issue. It began with Alyssa Milano on Twitter in October, 2017: “If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet.” The meme spread to Facebook, and millions quickly responded.

Much of the media coverage of #MeToo has focused on sexual assault, and sexual assault isn't something we can talk about in our group because of the emotions it would open up. And much of #MeToo attention has been directed at high-profile individuals, with public humiliations, lawsuits, job loss, and in some cases, prison. But harassment affects ordinary people, too, and it's worthwhile to discuss it in the context of ordinary individuals' workplace and public behavior.

Federal EEOC guidelines state that harassment may involve not only sexual advances, but also actions such as remarks or jokes. Such behaviors can seem minor, but they can lead to a “hostile work environment.” The Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research reports that “when people were asked if they experienced sexual harassment, about 25 percent reported some sort of harassment in the workplace. But when surveys provided details about specific acts of harassment, such as sexual coercion or crude jokes, 60 percent of people reported experiencing harassment.”

“Microaggressions” is the term that psychologists use for small actions directed against a group with less power, and the term reminds us that harassment may be about power as much as about gender or sex – or sexual preference or race or ethnicity or ability, for that matter. Those in power may also dismiss or refute another person's perception: “You are lying. That's not what I said/did” or “You are confused about what happened.” These behaviors, called “gaslighting,” are examples of refusing to acknowledge another's experience, and may also be considered harassment.

The transition to a new way of being has not been smooth, and sometimes leads to confusion. In the workplace, men sometimes feel reluctant to be chatty or friendly with a woman for fear of being accused of harassing, or feel confused about how to approach a personal relationship with the opposite sex. Women often feel that their complaints are unheeded, or worse, that to complain is useless, often does not help them regain dignity, and can result in job loss, more harassment, or lack of advancement. How can we learn to recognize each other's boundaries and respect them?

Change to our social systems, including the workplace, is not swift or sure, but it is desirable for people of different genders to be able to compete and coexist in harmony.

No one is immune to inheriting the racial and gender biases of our institutions. The more we are able to confront it without getting defensive, the better off we will be. *Derald Wing Sue*

Women who accuse men, particularly powerful men, of harassment are often confronted with the reality of the men's sense that they are more important than women, as a group. *Anita Hill*
It's our responsibility (and no one else's) to understand our identity and define our personal boundaries, to identify where we start and end and where the other person starts. Just as a property

owner may be angry when someone trespasses on his land, so too we become angry and hurt when other people trespass our personal boundaries. *Allison Bottke*

Nearly two-thirds (62%) of LGBT employees heard lesbian and gay jokes at work. *Deena Fidas et al, The Cost of the Closet and the Rewards of Inclusion*

There is a mass exodus from the collective comfort zone of the white heterosexual patriarchy, which means that it's now a lonely, confusing place to be. The only thing worse than being marooned in your own comfort zone is being forced to live in someone else's. Almost every queer person knows what that's like. Almost every woman knows, too. *Laurie Penny*

You can't run away from trouble. There ain't no place that far. *Joel Chandler Harris, Uncle Remus*

I figure that the degree of difficulty in combining two lives ranks somewhere between rerouting a hurricane and finding a parking place in downtown Manhattan. *Claire Cloninger, When the Glass Slipper Doesn't Fit and the Silver Spoon is in Someone Else's Mouth*

When you notice someone does something toxic the first time, don't wait for the second time before you address it or cut them off. Many survivors are used to the "wait and see" tactic which only leaves them vulnerable to a second attack. As your boundaries get stronger, the wait time gets shorter. You never have to justify your intuition. *Shahida Arabi*

Questions to Ponder

1. Think about times when you felt your boundaries were not respected. How did you feel? What was your response – for example, anger, an explanation, silence, something else?
2. How have your thoughts related to personal boundaries changed during your life?
3. How do you present your sense of boundaries to others? Do you handle situations differently between men and women, or between people of different sexual orientations?
4. Think about joking or other forms of humor. Can you recall an experience where humor was hurtful to someone because of gender or sexual orientation?
5. If you were in charge of "sensitivity training" for sexual harassment in a business or other organization, what would you emphasize?
6. Do you think society has become "too sensitive" to matters of gender, identity, sexual orientation, and harassment? Or not sensitive enough?

Words of the Day

Many of us may not have experienced sexual harassment, but we may have encountered situations where we felt our personal boundaries were breached. Reflect on how you felt then. Think of a word or phrase to complete this sentence: When my personal boundaries were breached, I felt