



Supporting friends and co-workers who have been sexually harassed

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This resource includes information for younger workers about how you can support friends or co-workers who have been sexually harassed. Remember: **if you, or someone else, is in immediate danger you should call the police on 000. If there is no immediate danger but you or someone else needs police assistance, phone 131 444.**

There is no one right way to respond to sexual harassment, just like there is no wrong way to respond.

Sexual harassment can lead to trauma

It is important to be aware that a person who has been sexually harassed may experience trauma. In order to provide appropriate support to your friends or co-workers who have been sexually harassed, you must first understand how trauma can affect people.

Trauma

- Trauma is an emotional response that may happen after distressing or harmful events or experiences.
- It can occur from a single event or a series of events.
- Trauma often impacts mental, physical, and psychosocial health.





We all react to stress and trauma differently. Remember, if a friend or co-worker is sexually harassed at work, it is not their fault.

Common responses to stress: Flight, fight, freeze or fawn

When we feel threatened, our body's automatic stress response takes over and we enter survival mode. This is not something that we can control; our bodies do this automatically to try to protect us.

People generally respond to threats by fighting, fleeing (running away), freezing (shutting down) or fawning (trying to please the person threatening them in an attempt to make the threat stop). Freezing and fawning are normal responses to a threat or stress. If a person does not fight back or run away when they are being harassed, this does not mean that they allowed or encouraged the harassment to happen.

Regardless of how a person responds, if a person is sexually harassed, it is not their fault.

The impacts of trauma

- The impacts of trauma are not always immediate.
- They may happen straight away.
- Or they may take days, months, years or even decades to impact someone.
- Trauma can impact brain development or function.
- It can also affect memory, making it difficult for people to tell their story in a clear and complete way.

Helping someone who is experiencing trauma

- Appropriate support can help a person to recover.
- Inappropriate or unhelpful support may make the impacts of trauma worse.
- Every person's recovery from trauma is different.
- Recovery depends on the person's experiences, including the level of support they receive, and their social, cultural and economic background.



Supporting people who have been sexually harassed

Taking action to support a friend or co-worker does not always mean confronting the harasser. One of the most helpful things you can do is to offer your support to the person who has been harassed. You should only take action if you feel that it is safe to do so.

If you provide support in an appropriate way, you can help to minimise the harm experienced by friends or co-workers who have been sexually harassed.

As a friend or co-worker, it is not your responsibility to determine whether the harassment occurred or to take any action against the harasser. If you feel comfortable doing so, what you can do is help your friend or co-worker to feel safe and support them to recover.

How can you help?

Key principles of providing appropriate support:



Listen without interruption or judgement



Minimise harm and ensure privacy



Recognise that sexual harassment can cause distress

1. Listen without interruption or judgement and show sympathy

- Listen and support your friend or co-worker.
- Allow your friend or co-worker to describe their experience in their own words and in their own time, without asking questions about what happened or interrupting.
- Listen actively, keeping your attention focused on your friend or co-worker and avoiding any distractions that may be around you.
- Understand that it may be difficult for your friend or co-worker to describe their experiences.



- If your friend or co-worker decides they want to stop talking about their experience, be respectful of their choice.

2. Minimise harm and ensure privacy

- Make sure that the safety, privacy and wellbeing of the person harassed is the priority.
- Do not share their story with others, question what they could or should have done in response to the harassment or blame them for the harassment they have experienced.
- It is up to your friend or co-worker to decide what they want to do.
- Do not share any information about what your friend or co-worker has told you unless they have asked you to or told you that it is ok for you to talk to others about it.

3. Recognise that sexual harassment can cause distress

- Be aware that sexual harassment can lead to trauma and that trauma affects people in different ways. There is no right, or wrong way, to react.

Provide information about support services

- Share information with your friend or co-worker about the professional support services available to help.
- Let your friend or co-worker know about free services like [1800 Respect](#), [Lifeline](#), [Headspace](#), [13Yarn](#) and [Kid's Helpline](#).
- These services offer counselling over the phone and some also provide counselling via online chat.
- If your workplace has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), find out how to contact them and let your friend or co-worker know what kind of support the EAP can provide.



Provide information about your workplace policies

- Share information with your friend or co-worker about the workplace policies on sexual harassment.
- If you do not know if there are any relevant policies, you can offer to find out by speaking to your manager, human resources, or another appropriate person. If you do this, it is important not to share any information about your friend or co-worker without their permission.



Provide information about reporting workplace sexual harassment

- Remind your friend or co-worker that workplace sexual harassment is against the law.
- Let them know that they have a right to make a complaint about what happened, if they choose to do so.
- Share information with your friend or co-worker about their different reporting options, if you know what they are, including within your organisation and to external agencies. Information about reporting options can be found on the [Respect@Work website](#).
- Remember that it is up to your friend or co-worker to decide whether they make a complaint, or not. Do not pressure them to make a complaint (or not to make a complaint).



What to do if you see or hear sexual harassment in your workplace



About 40% of workplace sexual harassment incidents are witnessed by someone else. If you see or hear sexual harassment in your workplace, there are several different things that you can do, if you feel that it is safe.

VicHealth has developed the '[Ladder of active bystanding](#)' which provides information about what you can do if you witness sexual harassment. Some of their suggested actions are:

Diffuse the situation

- Make a light-hearted comment to try to stop the harassment or change the subject.
- Tell the harasser that their behaviour is inappropriate.
- Give the harasser a disapproving look.

Check in with the person who has been harassed

- Let them know you saw or heard what happened and think it is inappropriate.
- Ask them if they are ok and let them know that you are there to help.
- Ask if they know about their options for getting support and reporting the harassment.
- Information about support services can be found on the [Respect@Work website](#).

Call out the behaviour

- Calmly tell the harasser that you think their behaviour is wrong or unacceptable.
- Explain to the harasser why you think it is important they stop the behaviour.



Report the sexual harassment

- If the person who has been harassed wishes to report the behaviour or make a complaint, offer to help them do this. For example, you could offer to sit with them while they fill out the complaint form, or to go with them to the meetings about the complaint.
- You could offer to write a witness statement or talk to their manager or the human resources department about what you saw or heard.
- If the person who has been harassed wishes to make a complaint to an external agency, offer to sit with them while they fill out the paperwork, make the phone call or go with them to the agency's office.
- Information about different reporting options can be found on the [Respect@Work website](#).

References:

QCDFVR, [Research to practice paper: Trauma-informed Responses to Sexual Assault](#), CQ University, Sydney.

Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety, *"Chuck her on a lie detector": Investigating Australian's mistrust in women's reports of sexual assault – Key messages*, ANROWS, 2021.

The Blue Knot Foundation, [Understanding trauma: Blue Knot Foundation fact sheet to foster understanding around trauma](#).

Healthline, [Fight, Flight, Freeze: What This Response Means](#), 2020.

Healthline, [The Beginner's Guide to Trauma Responses](#), 2021.

VicHealth and Behavioural Insights Team, [Take Action: Empowering bystanders to act on sexist and sexually harassing behaviours](#), Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne (2019).

For more information:

The Respect@Work website provides free information about workplace sexual harassment, including what it is and what you can do about it. To find out more, visit <https://respectatwork.gov.au/younger-workers>