

WHAT TO DO WHEN A COLLEAGUE TELLS YOU THEY WERE HARASSED

When someone you know or work with tells you they were a victim of sexual harassment, your response can position you as a powerful ally in their experience and can help them get the support they need.

Start by following the five guidelines below.

ACTIVELY LISTEN:

Lend a focused facial expression and neutral, nonjudgmental body language as you listen to the experience. Do not interrupt or share your own experiences.

ACKNOWLEDGE THE EXPERIENCE:

You don't have to understand sexual harassment policies or laws, or to have witnessed an incidence of harassment, to acknowledge your colleague or classmate's experience. Saying, "Thanks for sharing that with me," or "Thank you for trusting me with this information," can go a long way toward supporting a victim of sexual harassment.

AFFIRM:

Many victims of harassment wonder if what they experienced really happened, or whether they have misinterpreted or misremembered the sequence of events. Affirm that you're hearing your classmate or colleague by nodding, saying "hmm" or "yes" as you listen, or repeating back what your classmate or colleague has said.

AVOID QUESTIONING:

Don't question or criticize. Questions like, "Do you think he meant that as a compliment?" or "What were you wearing that day?" are not helpful and not pertinent to issues of sexual harassment. No one deserves to be sexually harassed, and if you're not sure what to say, you can say that!

ADVOCATE GETTING SUPPORT:

Let your classmate or colleague know that there are multiple channels for support, including formal reporting channels, counseling, peer advocacy and legal action. While sexual harassment can be isolating and intimidating, there are many paths toward support, recourse and legal guidance.

"Sexual harassment is not a root cause of anything. It is a symptom of a culture that values men and what they do more than women and what they do. This structure is virtually our every waking moment, but it's invisible. So if we want to shift our workplace culture, we actually have to shift our broader culture."

CAROLINE HELDMAN

**SURVIVOR'S ADVOCATE, AUTHOR
AND PROFESSOR, OCCIDENTAL
COLLEGE**

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HOW TO BE AN ALLY AGAINST SEXUAL HARASSMENT



As *Nevertheless* illustrates, sexual harassment is embedded in culture, habit and systemic power structures. As an ally or a bystander, you can combat the broader culture that supports sexual harassment.

Here's where to start:

- Advocate for equal pay, equal leadership and equal parental leave at your office. This can start with simply asking questions, for example, "Why is parental leave for non-birthing partners less than it is for birthing partners?" Or, "Why don't we have as many female managers as male?"
- Point out when credit for an idea or project is due to a female or LGBTQI+ coworker. If you routinely credit ideas to those who originated them, you'll be fairly recognizing everyone in your workplace.
- Watch and talk about media that promotes gender equity and refutes transphobia, transmisogyny, homophobia, racism, sexism or violence. Sharing stories that overtly validate marginalized identities showcases your priorities to others.
- Validate others when they act respectfully. Positive reinforcement of supportive and courteous behavior can be powerful in changing culture.

- Call harassment out when you see or hear it. This can be as gentle and non-combative as saying, "Whoa!" or "Hey!" when an inappropriate comment, photo, joke or gesture is shared. In other cases, you may need to be more assertive by saying, "That's really offensive," or "that's not funny."
- Act as a witness if you see your co-workers being targeted for harassment. Document what you see, and defend your colleagues whether or not they choose to report through official channels. You may also choose to anonymously report.
- If you witness verbal or physical harassment, intervene immediately. You might issue a verbal "Stop!" or merely use your presence to create physical space between a harasser and a victim. If you feel that you or another person is in danger, call a security guard or local law enforcement officer. Do not hesitate to call 911 if someone's immediate safety is at risk.

Sources for Further Study:

[Sexual Harassment at Work: A Resource for Women and Allies, Women Against Abuse](#)

[Guide for Allies, US Version, Better Brave](#)