

## **Sexual Harassment ~ Another Kind Of Pollution**

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*Every time Marcia glanced up from her desk at the office, her co-worker across the room was staring at her. He didn't say anything—he just looked at her in a way that made her feel as if he were trying to take her clothes off with his eyes. When she asked him to stop, he leered at her. "It's a free country," he said.*

*Roberta was a waitress who worked in a coffee shop. When a customer tried to grab her and made rude sexual jokes about her, she complained to her boss. "Just ignore it," her manager replied. "You must have done something to give him the wrong idea."*

*Alice was thrilled when her college professor called her in for a special conference to discuss her independent studies project. "You're a brilliant student," he said. "You could go far, with my help." To Maria's shock, he then leaned over and kissed her on the lips. When she didn't respond, he added, "Of course, you'll have to be a little more friendly."*

*Day after day, Dylan came home choked up and flushed. Three men in the factory where he worked kept snickering and making jokes about him being a "faggot" every time they saw him. The supervisor did not seem to notice. He was afraid of losing his job if he filed a formal complaint.*

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All of these people were victims of sexual harassment. Harassment simply means unwanted attention. Sexual harassment is the intentional imposition of unwanted sexual attention. Behavior that violates the standards set by the community or a boundary set by the individual can be considered intentional. It does not matter if the person doing the harassing thinks, "But it's just a joke!" It does not matter if that person thinks, "You're over-reacting." If you are forced to experience upsetting sexual behavior towards yourself or others in places where you cannot just leave, you have the right to protect yourself.

Women are often socialized to minimize sexual harassment. We are taught to say to ourselves, "It's not so bad. I can just ignore it. I must have done something to cause it." We are taught to say to each other, "He didn't mean anything by it. Don't be so sensitive."

One way to understand this issue is to see sexual harassment as being another kind of pollution. Although pollution usually doesn't kill you right away, it does make your environment less pleasant to live and work in. It erodes your

quality of life. Emotional toxins can even accumulate in your spirit in the same way that environmental toxins accumulate in your body to the point that you feel sick.

Many people dealing with sexual harassment get depressed. They might feel as if they can't stay at work or school or start to feel very badly about themselves.

Sexual harassment is against the law. Women and men have won major damages against businesses and schools that did not protect them from sexual harassment

Here are some steps you can take to protect yourself from sexual harassment.

1. **Notice it.** Sexual jokes, language, behavior, comments, or pictures directed at you or another person are all potential forms of sexual harassment. So is pestering someone for a date. If someone makes you uncomfortable, pay attention. You have the right to be emotionally and physically safe where you work, live, and go to school. Don't let embarrassment ("I don't want people to think I'm a bitch"), or denial ("It's really not that bad"), or feeling sorry for someone ("He can't help it if he likes me") stop you from paying attention to how you feel. Remember that what someone else does is not your fault.

2. **Name it.** Many times people don't realize the effect of what they are doing. If you just wish they would stop, it's usually not going to work. Instead, be clear, direct, and respectful by saying, "I don't like it when you talk to me like that. Please stop." People often don't like being told that they did something wrong, so you have to be prepared to persist. They might use denial and say, "I didn't do that!" They might try to make you wrong by saying, "You're awfully touchy today. Is it your period or something?" or "Can't you take a joke?" You can persist by saying, "Your behavior is making me uncomfortable. This is harassment. I expect it to stop." You might have mixed feelings about the person doing the harassing. The person might sometimes be fun to be with or someone you really care about. Remember that it does not do anyone any good to be allowed to get away with behavior that is upsetting and hurtful.

3. **Protect yourself.** As hard as it is to believe, some people are so committed to being able to harass others that they will get revenge by making someone who complains look badly. Do what's appropriate and practical to defend yourself from retaliation. For example, if the harasser is your boss, get copies of your employment records before filing a complaint.

4. **Document it.** Whenever possible, document the circumstances of the harassment and your efforts to stop it. Get witnesses. Join forces with others who have had similar experiences.

5. **Get help.** Often letting people know what is happening and how you feel about it is enough. If not, you can report the behavior. You can complain to people in positions of authority—supervisors, employers, business owners, personnel departments, counselors, or school officials. Many places now have procedures you can follow to make a formal complaint. In extreme cases, there are lawyers who specialize in sexual harassment cases who can help.

6. **Tell people how to support you.** You don't always have to solve your problems on your own. You can get help. Sometimes friends and family members do not understand how bad something like this can feel, so you may need to educate them. You can say, "The support I need is for you to listen." Or, "Please don't try to get me to feel better by making this trivial. This is sexual harassment and I need your support." You may also want to talk to counselors, peer support groups, and others who can understand your situation. Remember that secrecy keeps you feeling alone and allows the harasser to continue doing things that are hurtful to you and to others.

7. **Stick to your convictions.** It can be hard to confront sexual harassment. We live in changing times and change is uncomfortable. People might not like you. They might say bad things about you. But confronting sexual harassment is an important way of cleaning up the pollution in our environment. And a cleaner environment makes this a better world for all of us.