

What to do When You Are the Target of Harassment

Begin by trusting your gut reactions: your body doesn't lie. If a situation or behavior feels wrong it is wrong.

Your goals are

- to stop the current behavior
- express your anger and other emotions so that you don't carry them with you for the rest of the day.

You are not trying to elicit an apology or an explanation, or convince the harasser to change his ways.

Body language: neutral stance, weight balanced, head up, shoulders back, hands at your sides, no gestures (pointing, finger wagging)

Tone of voice and facial expression: intense and loud enough to clearly express the degree of upset you feel – from annoyance and irritation to full-on anger (not rage over past events). Keep your voice as calm as possible. Loud and clear are good. Remember, if people overhear, the embarrassment is his, not yours.

Simple, Clear, Direct message:

1. What they did/said, labeled as unwelcome and offensive
2. What you want them to do

Repeat as needed, regardless of what they say in response.

Be clear and be direct

- Identify the harasser by appearance: "You, the man in the yellow shirt . . ."
- Make and hold eye contact.
- State what he said or did, as simply and clearly as possible. "You are standing too close to me." "You just said . . ." "You just grabbed/touched my . . ." "Keep to the facts - you are objecting to his behavior, not to him."
- State what you want him to do. "Move away from me. Take three steps in that direction." "Stand over there" "Don't say that or anything like that to me . . ." "Don't touch me . . ." "Stop following me . . ." "That's harassment, I don't like it, women don't like it, stop harassing women"
- If it is safe, hold eye contact for a slow count of three.
- No matter what he does or says, just repeat your statements about what he did, and what you want him to do. DO NOT argue, rationalize, explain, defend.

DO NOT:

- ask questions (other than “What did you say?”). Questions like “Just what do you think you are doing?” invite conversation and gives the harasser more of what they want – your attention.
- use obscenities, call him names, or make obscene or threatening gestures.
- attempt to be clever, witty, or funny – you are not obligated to entertain anyone, and attempts at humor may escalate the encounter
- say anything polite or attempt to reduce their upset or make them feel better – no “please” or “would you mind. . .” or “I’m not sure you mean it this way . . .”

If the situation escalates, or if you are concerned that he might get physical (not life-threatening), you have some other options:

- If possible, just walk away.
- If you can’t walk away, request help, loudly and clearly. If security staff or police are nearby, call them in. If not, enlist bystanders. Be clear and direct, point at people if you have to. State what happened, is happening, and tell them what to do. “This man is harassing me. He won’t leave me alone.” “This man assaulted me. Call 911 and ask for police.”

If the situation escalates to the point that you fear you will be physically injured or killed, do as many of these as you can:

- Make as much noise as you can – yell, blow a whistle, bang on something, use whatever you have available.
- Use your environment – run into an occupied room or building, run into the street, pick up something to hit him with, etc.
- If he attacks you, hurt him in any way you can – scratch, bite, pinch, grab, poke, stomp, kick. The human body is not as easily injured as Hollywood wants you to think, so do your level best to do damage. Don’t just poke him in the eye, try to gouge it out with your nails. Don’t just bite his hand, try to tear off some flesh or a finger. Don’t just step on his foot, stomp on it hard enough to send it through the floor. Don’t poke, punch, or kick AT – poke, punch and kick THROUGH.
- When he lets go, run as fast as you can to an occupied room or building or anywhere you can find other people. **LEAVE YOUR SHOES AND HANDBAG BEHIND IF THEY ARE SLOWING YOU DOWN. CUT FEET WILL HEAL. STUFF CAN BE REPLACED.**

In the workplace or other situation of regular contact, if the harassment doesn’t stop:

- keep a written record of what happens, when (date and time), where, and who (if anyone) was present and witnessed it
- continue to assert that the behavior is unwelcome and unwanted, verbally and (if possible) in writing

Wherever it happens, report the harassment.

- Street harassment: report it on a website or social media site

- (<http://www.collectiveactiondc.org>), report it to security or police
- Public transportation harassment: all of the above, and report it to the public transportation agency
- Harassment in other public places: (e.g. stores, gyms, theaters): same as street harassment, and report it to management
- Workplace harassment: follow your employer's procedures; if your employer does not take action consider contacting EEOC

What to Do When You Witness Harassment: Being an Ally

Stand out of reach of the harasser and address the target.

- Ask a question, "Are you ok? Is everything ok here? Is he bothering you?" If she answers yes, ask, "How can I help you? Do you want me to walk with you? Is there someone I can call? Should I call the police?"
- If she answers no, she may be feeling coerced. Stop asking questions and stand out of reach and keep looking. Don't challenge, question, or threaten the harasser directly
- If you witness a physical assault of any kind, or if you feel in danger of being assaulted, stay out of reach of the assailant and call 911 immediately.

Organizational Response to Harassment at Meetings, Conferences, and Conventions: Crafting an Effective Anti-Harassment Policy

NOTE: The Ada Initiative website (www.adainitiative.org) is a rich source of information about how to deal with harassment at meetings.

Dealing with incidents of harassment requires quick and decisive action to restore a sense of safety for the targets and the witnesses of harassment, and safety of attendees must take priority.

Effective anti-harassment policies have the following characteristics:

- the policy clearly states that harassment is unacceptable, clearly defines harassment, and gives examples of unacceptable behavior
- the policy is widely publicized (given prominence on the meeting website, printed in the meeting book, appears on slides between presentations, is prominently posted throughout the meeting venue)
- the policy includes a clear and simple reporting process for targets and for those who witness harassment
- incident reports are reviewed immediately
- decisions are made quickly
- decisions are final
- decisions are made by one individual, or by a small group of decision-makers
- decisions are communicated to those who need to know the outcome (the harasser, the reporter, the target, and event security) in a way that increases safety for attendees.

Do not assume that the target was under any obligation to attempt to stop the behavior.

When confronting a harasser about his behavior, your intent is to end the harassing behavior.

- Describe the behavior, explain how it constitutes harassment from the point of view of the target (the “reasonable woman” standard), and ask that he stop.
- If necessary and if possible, ask that he avoid contact with the target for the rest of the meeting.
- If avoiding contact is not possible, consider the effect his remaining at the meeting will have on the target’s (and other attendees’) safety, and whether he should be asked to leave the meeting.

If you have any reason to believe the harasser will not stop the behavior, particularly if he does any of the following, he should be asked to leave the meeting immediately.

- claims that he was not harassing the target
- expresses no remorse or understanding that what he did was wrong
- refuses to accept the consequences of his behavior and continues to defend his behavior
- has a pattern of unacceptable behavior (at this or at previous meetings)

Egregious incidents, or repeated incidents of harassment by the same individual may rise to the level of banning the individual from attending the meeting for a period of time (usually a few years) or in perpetuity. Certainly any behavior that includes physical assault (including groping), real or implied threat of physical harm, or the real or implied threat of professional or financial consequences should trigger this level of sanction.

Resources:

Gavin. De Becker. *The Gift of Fear: Survival Signals That Protect Us From Violence*. New York: Delta, 1999.

Martha Langelan. *Back Off: How to Confront and Stop Sexual Harassment and Harassers*. No Edition Stated ed. Touchstone, 1993.

“Ada Initiative Anti-Harassment Work.” <http://adainitiative.org/what-we-do/conference-policies/> (accessed August 26, 2014).

Louise Yolton Eberhardt. *Confronting Sexual Harassment (Working With Groups in the Workplace)*. Whole Person Associates, 1995.

Holly Kearl. *Stop Street Harassment: Making Public Places Safe and Welcoming for Women*. Stop Street Harassment: Making Public Places Safe and Welcoming for Women, 2012.