



Identifying and Responding to Harassment

What is harassment?

Harassment is a type of violence in which individuals are targeted based on an aspect of their identity or perceived identity. Individuals can be targeted because of their:

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| Gender | Sexual orientation | Gender identity |
| Race | Ethnicity | Religious affiliation |
| Class | Size | Physical/mental ability |

Harassment ranges from a mild annoyance to a serious threat and can take verbal, physical, and written forms. Someone's speech or actions are a form of harassment when it interferes with your ability to be safe and comfortable, whether at home, school, work, or in public spaces. An environment where harassment occurs becomes offensive, intimidating, and/or hostile.

What does harassment look like?

Harassers can be strangers, people you know, or people you love. They often employ numerous methods to control you by using physical proximity, crossing physical and/or emotional boundaries, stalking, and cyber stalking. They use physical, emotional or social power to create fear. Forms of harassment include:

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| Put-downs | Social exclusion | Unwanted sexual propositions/touching |
| Teasing | Spreading of rumors/gossip | Threatening written communication |
| Rude Gestures | Hate-based comments | Display of sexually explicit materials |

Assessing the nature of harassment

- **Gather information**—is the incident a first occurrence, or a recurring form of harassment? Are you isolated and alone or are allies present? Are there escape routes or safe places to go to?
- **Use your instincts**—what does your gut tell you about the harasser's intent? Does it feel more like an annoyance or a threat?
- **Assess your internal state**—are you strong and calm enough to respond assertively? If not, can you be an actor—taking charge of yourself and the situation now, knowing you can vent later?

Responding to harassment

At Thousand Waves, we recommend responding assertively and avoiding an aggressive or passive reaction. An aggressive reaction (i.e., yelling a sarcastic remark at the harasser) can release your anger, but also has the potential to escalate the situation, while a passive reaction ("taking it" and remaining silent) can signal the harasser to keep going. Try to choose an assertive response that best fits the situation, the environment, and your state of mind.



Guidelines and Response Options

- **Trust instincts:** Instincts are physical messages your body sends to alert you to the potential of danger. Listen to these messages and choose a response that feels appropriate to the situation.
- **Pretend to ignore:** Monitor the situation and actively ignore the harassment, while being aware of your escape routes. Note - this strategy may not be appropriate if the harasser repeatedly bothers you, or the harassment is physical.
- **Speak directly to the harasser:** If you feel safe doing it, direct and assertive communication can be an effective response. Use the skills of boundary setting to name the harasser's behavior and say what you want to happen: "What you just said is harassment. I don't like being talked to like that. I want you to stop." Or, if it's physical harassment, "Take your hand off my leg. We are colleagues not friends. Don't do it again."
- **Seize the initiative:** Before the harassment occurs or as soon as your instincts alert you to its potential, it can be effective to seize the initiative and model a polite and respectful way for individuals to communicate with one another. Try using an unnaturally loud and strong voice to say: "Good Morning" or to make a comment that refers to a shared experience such as: "Beautiful day isn't it?" This can interrupt the harasser's mental "circuitry" and guide them to say something more appropriate than they originally intended.
- **Switch strategies:** If these types of assertive responses are not successful in stopping the harassment, take charge of the decision of when and how to switch strategies. You can use firmer verbal boundary setting skills, leave the scene, or seek help from a friend, ally, or person in authority.

Harassment in workplace and school settings

In workplace or school situations, responding to harassment might require additional strategies, especially if it is repeated or involves an authority figure, multiple harassers or multiple victims. In these cases it may be most effective to combine both individual and collective strategies.

- **Document what is happening**—create a written record of what occurred including time, dates, places, and witnesses, capturing as many details as possible.
- **Seek support**—Talking with others, both inside and outside the organization where harassment is occurring can break your isolation and enable you to recruit allies. You may find out others have experienced the same harassing treatment and are willing to be part of a joint action.
- **Research your organization's harassment policy**—tell an authority figure or person in charge to enlist their help and support. If there is a policy in place, follow the protocol for documenting and reporting harassment.
- **Go outside your organization**—if appropriate, file a complaint with a government or advocacy organization to solicit their help. You may choose to engage legal help—if so, remember that many organizations do *pro bono* work in areas of civil rights issues.

Make change

It can be hard to respond to harassment, but choosing to take assertive action can reduce the negative impacts and create positive change—in you, in the harasser, and in your community.