

# Handling sexual harassment in the workplace

What to do when you're a victim or witness of harassment at work.



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Sexual harassment is a serious issue that affects many industries, but particularly those with high numbers of female employees. It occurs in all sorts of organisations, irrespective of size – from big corporations to small single-owner shops. No longer as taboo as it once was, sexual harassment is an issue that can be addressed, minimised and dealt with effectively – you just need to know the signs, who to turn to and what to do.

Sexual harassment is any kind of unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favour or other verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. It is illegal if (a) you must accept the behaviour to keep your job (b) if the conditions of your employment (such as pay, promotion, vacations, roster) depend on your accepting the behaviour or (c) if the behaviour creates a hostile or offensive work environment that interferes with your ability to do your job.

parties involved. If the behaviour is unwelcome – in other words if it is not initiated by the recipient and is found to be offensive – then it is deemed to be sexual harassment.

There are three main types of sexual harassment – physical, verbal and non-verbal. Physical sexual harassment is usually the most obvious and may include discreet behaviour such as touching, patting, pinching, kissing, or brushing against people in an inappropriate manner. Physical sexual harassment can also be classed as assault or forced sexual intercourse. Verbal sexual harassment is just as inappropriate and illegal, and includes unwelcome sexual advances, offensive flirtations, suggestive remarks or pressure for sexual intercourse. Non-verbal sexual harassment includes suggestive pictures/pornographic material (eg. screen savers, pictures, objects) that make

simply ignore the harasser's behaviour or even worse justify the behaviour as a harmless misunderstanding. This is especially common in Australia's multicultural society where our workforce is made up of different races, religions, ethnicities, gender and sexual orientation. However despite the variances in our society, there is no excuse for offensive unwelcome behaviour. Whether you feel the harassment

is intended or not, if you view the behaviour to be offensive and if it makes you feel uncomfortable it needs to be stopped immediately.

There is no perfect way to deal with or prevent sexual harassment. Different responses will apply to different people and differing circumstances. The main thing to realise is that there's help and support out there so you can protect yourself and others around you.



**"Many people find it easier to ignore the sexual harassment or even worse, justify the behaviour."**

Sometimes it can be difficult to determine what is harmless flirting or sexual harassment. Only unwelcome conduct can be seen as sexual harassment. For example, consensual dating, joking or flirting in the workplace is not viewed as harassment if the behaviour is welcomed by all

sexually suggestive comments. It also includes any of the examples listed above that may be communicated via email or writing.

Often the thought of dealing with sexual harassment is terrifying. Who do you turn to? Many people find it easier to

## Dealing with sexual harassment

### 1. Tell someone you trust

Admit that a problem exists and confide in someone. Ignoring harassment is one of the worst things you can do. It is likely your colleagues are experiencing the same thing and speaking up can protect others from being victimised. Furthermore, if there are complaints from more than one person, your employer is more likely to take quick action to stop the harassment. If you are being followed or harassed outside of the pharmacy by a co-worker, employer or customer file a police report immediately. If you have been assaulted you should seek urgent medical attention.

### 2. Confront the issue

If there is no apparent threat to your personal safety, you should start by confronting the harasser. In many cases you can stop the behaviour by speaking up in a firm and clear manner so the harasser realises their behaviour is unwelcome and will not be tolerated. Be specific about what you find offensive, why it bothers you

and the appropriate behaviour you would like it replaced with. An example of this may be: "When you make comments about my appearance I feel offended and very uncomfortable. I want to be respected and treated like a professional, so please do not do it again". If confronting the harasser is too hard, consider writing them a letter.

### 3. Keep evidence

If the harassment continues even after you have confronted your harasser, you will need to take the matter further. If you do decide to lodge a complaint you will need to keep a detailed record of events relating to the harassment including dates, times, descriptions of events and witnesses. Keep any documentation that will help you prove that the harassment took place in case there is ever any doubt.

### 4. Lodge a formal complaint

Formal complaints can be lodged with senior management or with the HR department, assuming you are employed by a pharmacy group. If your HR department or senior management refuses to take action or if the harasser is your employer, lodging a formal

complaint may be your only option. You can make your complaint in the strictest of confidence with HREOC (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission). Any formal written complaint will be investigated until an outcome is reached. Contact the HREOC at <http://www.hreoc.gov.au> for more information.

### 5. Support networks

No one ever deserves to be sexually harassed. Realising that you are not to blame can be difficult. It's important to remember that you are never on your own and there are many support groups that you can turn to for specialist advice, comfort and safety. Victims of sexual harassment can often experience shock, trauma, depression, low self-esteem, shame, fear, guilt and anxiety. These emotions can also affect your physical health and wellbeing. It is essential that you seek support when dealing with or witnessing harassment. You can find support networks at [www.equalopportunitycommission.vic.gov.au](http://www.equalopportunitycommission.vic.gov.au).

Sexual harassment is a serious offence that must not be taken lightly. Understanding it is the first step to preventing it happening to yourself and others around you.