

Coping With Sexual Harassment at Work

Maureen has a problem with her co-worker, Jim. “During a recent project meeting, I was venting my frustration over the workload, and he reached out and rubbed my shoulder. Another time, he said ‘hi,’ squeezing my arm as we passed in the hall. Touching makes me feel very uncomfortable, but I’m not sure he means anything by it. I don’t want to get the guy in trouble—he’s a nice guy and a good worker. But I want the behavior to stop.”

Maureen’s problem with Jim illustrates a gray area surrounding sexual harassment that many women—and even some men—experience in the workplace. Is Jim’s behavior sexual harassment? Or is Maureen overreacting?

What is sexual harassment?

Sexual harassment is any unwelcome physical or verbal conduct of a sexual nature in the workplace. Offensive jokes, suggestive comments, offensive pictures or objects, or flirting can be considered sexual harassment if the behavior or situation interferes with an individual’s job performance or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment—even if the perpetrator truly didn’t “mean any harm.”

Research suggests that even low-level sexual harassment—the gray area—can impact an individual’s emotional well-being, professional relationships and job satisfaction, as well as economic status (if the individual chooses to leave the job to escape the situation).

Maureen suspects that Jim simply wants to be supportive of her. Still, she finds his behavior offensive, and it causes her emotional distress. What can Maureen do to stop the unwanted behavior and encourage a purely professional relationship with Jim?

Coping with sexual harassing behavior—a direct approach

Confront the perpetrator, asking him/her to stop the behavior. Be specific. Keep your body posture strong and assured. Do not smile. Make it clear that you don’t like the behavior. You do not need to be apologetic or provide explanation. Here are some examples:

“Jim, sometimes you touch me when we are talking, such as rubbing my shoulder or squeezing my arm when you pass. I prefer that you do not touch me when we talk.”

“Mary, I would like you to stop staring at me in the break room and making suggestive comments—it’s offensive to me.”

If the first attempt fails, try again with a stronger rebuff:

“Jim, I’ve told you not to touch me. I insist that you stop.”

A third and final attempt to ask the perpetrator to stop could go like this:

“Mary, I’ve already told you that the way you look and talk to me is inappropriate and offensive. If you do not stop, I’m going to have to report this behavior to personnel.”

If spoken attempts to stop the offensive behavior fail, put your demands in writing and hand deliver the letter to the perpetrator. List the explicit behavior, including as much detail as possible, such as when and where the behavior occurred and any witnesses to the incidence. Also, mention how you want your relationship to be. For

example, "I want our relationship to be purely professional." If the behavior occurs more than once or twice, mention that the specific incidence described in the letter is just one of many. A written approach shows that you are very serious and are possibly considering reporting the behavior.

Document offensive behaviors using a bound book that paper cannot be added to. Detail the incident, as previously described. Jot down direct quotes; collect evidence, such as notes or materials sent to you. Keep your documentation at home.

Tell people you trust about the offending behavior when it happens.

Consider reporting the behavior to personnel or your supervisor.

Direct versus indirect coping strategies

This approach for dealing with inappropriate behavior or harassment is a direct coping strategy. Confronting the harasser is an effective way to stop the unwanted behavior; it's a problem-focused approach.

Most women, however, opt for indirect coping strategies, which are emotion-focused, such as:

avoiding the harasser

"laughing off" or excusing the behavior (such as, "Well, he's in the middle of a divorce, so he's going through a lot right now" or "This dress is a little short—I brought it on myself")

reconceptualizing the behavior (such as, "She's just complimentary" or "He's just being supportive")

If someone is making you feel uncomfortable at work, you need to take direct action sooner rather than later. Allowing the problem to persist can reduce self-esteem and cause feelings of self-doubt, self-blame, guilt, fear, anxiety and depression. All of this can erode your conviction to directly approach the offender and solve the problem.

For more advice on handling sexual harassment, contact your employee assistance program or human resources department.

Resources

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
www.eeoc.gov

Women Employed Institute
www.womenemployed.org

Sexual Harassment on the Job, 4th edition by William Petrocelli and Barbara Kate Repa. Nolo, 1999.

Sources: Sexual Harassment in the Workplace and Academia: Psychiatric Issues edited by Diane K. Shrier, MD. American Psychiatric Press, 1996; "Job-Related and Psychological Effects of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: Empirical Evidence from Two Organizations" by Kimberly T. Schneider, Suzanne Swan and Louise Fitzgerald. (1997) Journal of Applied Psychology, 82(3); "Coping Styles" in Sex Roles: A Journal of Research, February, 2003.

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