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Sexual Harassment: Myths and Realities

Misconceptions

People who cry "sexual harassment" need to lighten up. They just can't take a joke.

Sexual harassment isn't a big problem at college.

Peers just like to flirt and tease each other--no harm is meant by it.

Reality

"Joking is a time-honored way to mask hostility--cruelty by caricature."¹ Research indicates that for both men and women, tolerance for sexual harassment is positively related to belief in rape myths, and beliefs that heterosexual relationships are adversarial.² For men, it is the strongest predictor of likelihood to rape.

Sexual harassment is prohibited by federal law and by the University of Virginia. Title IX of the Civil Rights Act protects students from sex discrimination (including harassment) in programs or activities that receive federal funding. Under Title VII, two types of sexual harassment are identified as forms of workplace discrimination:

- 1) Quid pro quo harassment involves requesting sexual activity in exchange for retaining or advancing in one's job.
- 2) Hostile environment harassment involves repeated unwanted conduct of a sexual nature (which could be verbal, physical, or written)

Studies estimate that anywhere from 13% to 33% of female college students are victims of harassment. Graduate students may be more vulnerable to the power issues involved, because their careers may be at stake if they speak up. Harassment by peers is most common, occurring in approximately 42% of undergraduates and 52% of graduate students. Additionally, 20% to 50% of female faculty members report experiencing some form of sexual harassment.³ Few of these cases are actually reported, however.

Flirting is fine if it is wanted and mutual. Harassment by peers is different, and comes in many forms, such as teasing, innuendo, inappropriate sexual comments, street harassment, unwelcome touches or kisses, obscene jokes or e-mail messages, sending pornographic photos, sexist graffiti, etc. More serious episodes tend to involve groups of men who denigrate women by rating their sexual attractiveness, whistling and shouting lewd comments, sexually violent rituals used by certain fraternities, vandalizing sororities, or even gang rape.⁴

Productive Thinking

By learning what my rights are, I can become a stronger advocate for myself and others, and be more sensitive to the concerns of harassment victims. Sexual harassment is not a subject to be taken lightly, and if something offends me I have a right to make myself heard.

I understand that denying the pervasiveness of sexual harassment only perpetuates the problem.

If I learn to identify the many forms that harassment can take, I will be able to identify problematic behavior early on and take action as soon as possible before it gets worse.

Footnotes

I don't want to make things worse, so I've just learned to ignore it.

Although victims frequently ignore harassment in the hope that it will stop, in actuality this is often perceived as encouragement. Studies show that harassment typically continues or worsens when ignored. Some women may mistakenly feel flattered by harassing comments, see them as normal, or fear social disapproval if they speak up.

I will learn to establish clear boundaries and develop assertive strategies to confront harassers, in order to take care of myself.

If women wouldn't dress or behave provocatively they wouldn't get harassed. "They're asking for it."

This is victim-blaming. Sexual harassment has little to do with dress, sexiness, or attractiveness, and much more to do with power and control. No manner of dress is an invitation to be touched or verbally harassed.

I understand that how people dress is an expression of how they feel about themselves and that it is not an invitation for abuse. I have a right to dress how I want and to not be harassed for it. This is an excuse, NOT a cause.

Making such a big deal out of "sexual harassment" is making it hard for most men and women to have normal, friendly relationships.

Truly friendly behavior doesn't cause harm. Sexual harassment occurs when a person or authority figure engages in repeated, sexually oriented behavior that is unwanted by the recipient. It is degrading and a breach of trust that can have significant emotional and psychological, even physical, effects.

I will do my best to avoid offending others by asking them what makes them uncomfortable and then respecting those boundaries.

Everyone enjoys teasing, flirting, and knowing that someone else finds her or him attractive or sexy.

Harassers frequently seem surprised to find out their behavior was unwelcome, whether or not it was intentional. Also, context often makes a difference. It is dangerous to assume that sexual attention will be well-received or appreciated. In some work environments, particularly for workers whose physical attractiveness may be part of their job, sexual banter may be a norm. Even if enjoyed, however, this banter often reinforces "patriarchal, racist, and heterosexist norms."⁶ Sexual harassment in any setting is often intertwined with racism, fueled by stereotypes about the sexuality of various cultural groups.

I won't presume that others enjoy the same kind of flirtatious banter that I do. I can refuse to participate in interactions that make me uncomfortable, including confronting racist, sexist, or homophobic stereotypes.

I don't know anyone who would commit sexual harassment.

Even nice guys harass. Most harassers first disarm their victims with charm. There is no one "type" of person who will sexually harass another, although the majority are men. They may also have many positive qualities (e.g., talent, intelligence, good looks, popularity, status, etc.) which don't make them "look" like a harasser.

I will no longer dismiss offensive behavior by someone who I like, but will also learn to confront the behavior without condemning the person.

If I'm a man, sexual harassment isn't my problem.

Assertive responses can be very effective with approximately two-thirds of harassers.⁷ Unfortunately, many still believe that a female who says "no" really means "yes," which leads to harassment continuing.

I understand that sexual harassment is everyone's problem, and affects the women in my life in negative ways, which in turn impacts me. Ultimately it is the harassers who are responsible for their behavior, but I understand that I have the right to stand up for myself and will learn to confront harassment in all its forms until it no longer exists.

For more information visit the University's [Equal Opportunity Programs website](#).

If you are harassed:

Remember that no one deserves to be harassed, and that you have the right to defend yourself.

Reacting in anger and in a manner that attacks the harasser can escalate the situation, but an assertive reaction focuses on the behavior, not the person, and thus does not trample on their rights as a person.

Confront the harasser in a calm, firm voice by: 1) identifying the offensive behavior, 2) stating your reaction, and 3) offering an alternative behavior.

If a low-key approach is unsuccessful or impossible:

Document the behavior
Report the harassment
Seek support from others

1. Hughes, JD and Sandler, Bernice R. (1988). Peer Harassment: Hassles for Women on Campus. Project on the Status & Education of Women.
2. Reilly, ME, Lott, B, Caldwell, D, and DeLuca, L.(1992). Tolerance for Sexual Harassment Related to Self-Reported Sexual Victimization. *Gender and Society*. 6(1)122-138.
3. Hughes and Sandler (1988).
4. Hughes and Sandler (1988).
5. Allen, D. and Kawa, JB (1987). A Counseling Center Looks at Sexual Harassment. *Journal of NAWDAC*, 9-16.
6. Giuffre, PA and Williams, CL (1994). Boundary Lines: Labeling Sexual Harassment in Restaurants. *Gender and Society*. 8(3)378-401.
7. Allen and Okawa, A Counseling Center.