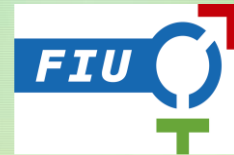


Sexual harassment

- Also a colleague's responsibility



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Plan for today's course

- Learn about why preventing and dealing with sexual harassment is everybody's business
- Intervening: What co-workers can do
- Learn how to intervene
- Get tools on how to work with co-worker responsibility in your workplace
- Read more? : <https://fiu-ligestilling.dk/en/tools-and-materials/sexual-harassment-how-to-speak-out-as-a-colleague/>



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Understanding that dealing with and preventing sexual harassment is everybody's responsibility, knowing when to intervene and how to do it – that is what this course is all about.

The bigger aim of this course is to give you the tools and knowledge to start working with the implementation of co-worker responsibility in your own workplace.

Sexual harassment is everybody's business – not just the harasser and the harassed's

- Shared responsibility:
For preventing/dealing with sexual harassment *and* creating a good work environment
- Be serious about bystander responsibility
- Not intervening = passive support
- Consequences: Psychological, economic



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Shared responsibility

If a workplace wishes to actively prevent and deal with sexual harassment, it is very important to think about sexual harassment as something that involves the entire workplace and every employee, manager and so on. People who have never been subjected to harassment and people who will never act in a harassing manner, also have to get on board and get involved in this work in order to really handle the problem of sexual harassment.

Therefore, every single person in a workplace is responsible for creating a sexual harassment-free environment, and that is why it is crucial that everybody knows about sexual harassment, how to prevent it and deal with it if it occurs.

Bystander responsibility and passive support

Some cases of sexual harassment happen without any witnesses – but some episodes of sexual harassment happen out in the open, too. And in these cases it is so important – especially for the person subjected to the sexual harassment – that bystanders intervene and act when they see something that they think may be sexual harassment. If someone witnesses something and does not act in any way (even if acting is difficult and uncomfortable), then that person is actually passively

supporting the harassment. And that is another reason why sexual harassment is a topic that concerns everybody in the workplace – not just the harasser or the harassed.

Consequences

The reason why this topic is important is that sexual harassment can have very severe consequences for the person subjected to the sexual harassment: Depression, anxiety, PTSD, loss of job and decreased work ability are just some of the psychological and very concrete consequences that are related to sexual harassment.

Apart from that, sexual harassment also has great economic consequences – to society in general, but also to the company of the harassed and the harasser: People who are subjected to sexual harassment unfortunately often quit their job which is a very real and negative consequence both to the person but also to the company because they will need to spend resources hiring and training a new employee. Furthermore, sexual harassment also often results in sick-leave and workplaces with sexual harassment do not score top points when it comes to workplace environment, work-satisfaction and work-efficiency.

Therefore, each workplace is – if not legally – then ethically responsible for dealing with and preventing sexual harassment actively. And one way to do that is to practice how bystanders can and should act if they witness something they suspects could be sexual harassment.

▸ The upside to actively involving yourself

- You can help someone – a lot!
- If you, as a witness, think it is uncomfortable – then put yourself in the shoes of the person on the receiving end of the sexual harassment
- Getting involved = preventing



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The most obvious reason why getting involved is the right thing to do is of course that you can help someone who may be in a situation they are not able to get of out themselves – a situation that may be very uncomfortable and possibly damaging to their mental well-being. Being sexually harassed is a bad experience in and of itself, but being sexually harassed in front a witness who does not help, intervene, or acknowledge what is going on can sometimes be just as hurtful as the harassment itself.

A good way of thinking about possibly intervening is to think about how uncomfortable you may feel as a witness – then, think about the person on the receiving end of the sexual harassment. If *you* are comfortable, the person is most likely also very uncomfortable.

The third upside to actively involving yourself, it that by speaking up you will be contributing to the prevention of sexual harassment – because someone speaking up equals someone getting actively involved in creating a good work environment. For every time someone intervenes a situation they think may be sexual harassment, the other people in the workplace will be reminded that it is important to be mindful of other people's different boundaries and that certain behaviour/language is not be

okay. Speaking up will most likely make your co-workers think twice the next time they are about to say or do something that may be experienced as sexual harassment.

Why speaking up as a bystander is often not easy

1. Grey area
2. Fear of social exclusion, of second hand sexual harassment, and of peer pressure
3. It is a taboo topic
4. Sexual harassment is about the harassed's *experience* which is hard to get clear on as a bystander



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The reason why every single person does not just speak up and intervene if they think they are witnessing sexual harassment, is that it is difficult thing to do. If it wasn't, there wouldn't be a problem.

There are several reasons why speaking up and taking responsibility as a co-worker or witness can be a difficult, uncomfortable or maybe even risky thing to do. And these reasons are important to acknowledge, talk openly about, and to find a solution to. Just demanding that people speak up and ending the conversation there will most likely not lead to change and a sexual harassment-free workplace.

Grey area

The first thing to consider is that sometimes bystanders are not sure whether what they are witnessing is or isn't sexual harassment. Thoughts like: "Perhaps they just have a close relationship", "I'm not sure he/she/they find this improper or uncomfortable" and so on – these thoughts are often barriers that keep people from intervening and taking responsibility. It is important to note here that of course not all cases of sexual harassment is a grey area-case. Some language and behaviour is just not appropriate in any situation.

Fear

The second thing people may struggle with in regards to speaking up is fear. Fear of being socially excluded can be a barrier. Especially if the general “tone” in the workplace is sexist or harassing, then it can be hard. And also, if the person witnessing the potential harassment does not feel socially included at the workplace, then it can be very difficult to insert oneself in a potentially conflict-filled situation.

Fears of “inviting” sexual harassment onto oneself can also be another reason why people do not dare to speak up. Speaking up may feel like heightening the risk of becoming a target. And this fear – like the others – is unfortunately not unrealistic, because sometimes people who support a victim/survivor of sexual harassment or stand up to a harasser, become a target of sexual harassment or a target of other types of harassment and/or bullying themselves. This is a way some harassers try to maintain a culture of silence and a culture of harassment. Therefore it is also important to support the person who intervenes so that that person does not become a new or an additional target of sexual harassment. This means that it is not just the person subjected to the sexual harassment who shouldn’t stand alone, but the person intervening should also receive support when intervening. Therefore colleague responsibility has multiple layers to it.

Peer pressure can also play a part, especially if the culture is one where sayings like “Come on, it’s just a joke” and “don’t take it so seriously” is the norm. Then it can be difficult to break that norm and stand up to the peers.

Taboo

The third barrier to speaking up is that sexual harassment in general is a taboo topic because it is associated with power, sex, the body, shame and guilt – all topics most people, especially in a work situation, find very uncomfortable to deal with.

Experience

The fourth reason why speaking up is difficult, is related to the fact that sexual harassment is defined by the harassed’s *experience*. This means that it is not the *intention* of the harasser but the *experience* of the person subjected to the sexual harassment that defines whether something is or isn’t sexual harassment. (Making the *intention* the defining factor would mean that someone grabbing another person’s body or telling a sexist “joke” – then that would not count as sexual harassment if the harasser didn’t mean to hurt or harass anyone. And that is not durable.) And when *experience* is the defining factor, then – as a bystander – it can be really hard to determine from the outside what kind of experience someone is having.

How to speak up

- Arrange a meeting on co-worker responsibility.
Talk about:
 1. The importance of speaking up + why prevention is everybody's responsibility
 2. What people find difficult about speaking up
 3. Which words/sentences could be used
 4. Practice, practice, practice!
 5. What to say if someone acts defensively/disrespectfully
- If it helps, start using the term: killjoy



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It is not enough to just demand that people speak up. Bystander-involvement or co-worker-responsibility is not fostered just by stating that everybody needs to speak up and take responsibility.

If you really want to prevent and deal with sexual harassment in a way that has impact, it is paramount that you start a conversation in your workplace with your co-workers about “how do we intervene if we think we may be witnessing sexual harassment?”.

This conversation is rarely something that naturally comes up over lunch or in another casual situation, which is why you should arrange and facilitate a more formal meeting in your workplace where you and your co-workers can open up this conversation in a manner that feels as safe as possible.

Therefore, how to even begin creating a culture where people speak up and take responsibility collectively, starts with arranging a meeting where all the aspects of intervening are discussed openly and respectfully. There are four pointers you should cover in such a meeting:

- 1) The importance of speaking up and the importance of thinking about sexual harassment as everybody's responsibility
- 2) Talk about what each person would find difficult about speaking up
- 3) How to speak up – and this needs to be very concrete: Discuss which exact words and sentences could work. It is very different what people will be comfortable saying and that is completely okay. Everyone needs to find a language that works for them.
- 4) Then, everybody should practice saying their sentences out loud. It often feels easier to intervene – especially if the situation is difficult or uncomfortable – if you have practiced saying the exact sentences before. For most people it does not come naturally to insert themselves in a possibly conflict-filled situation, and therefore we need to prepare them in the best way possible in order to support them in taking responsibility.
- 5) At last, it may be necessary to think about what to say in response to someone who does not react well when somebody intervenes. There are some general things people often say to deflect what is said, if someone receives the intervention as a critique or blame. So what to say if people get defensive or do not respect what you say, may also be important to include.

Killjoy

If you and your co-workers find that it is difficult to take the first step to intervene, then you may find it helpful to use and create a common understanding of the word “killjoy” in your workplace.

A killjoy is a term used about the practice or the person who interrupts or calls out improper behaviour or language – for example sexist or racist language. It is not that a sexist or racist language, “tone” or anything else is joyful, but the word “killjoy” points to the fact that often, when intervening, it can feel like you ruin the so-called “good vibes”. A situation where a bunch of people for example are laughing at a sexist “joke” can be hard to disrupt because you put an end to a situation that someone may think is light or funny, and by intervening you change the entire situation or tone to something much more serious and possibly uncomfortable.

To people who are uncomfortable ruining the “good vibes” in a situation, it may be helpful or make it easier to intervene if they can use a phrase like: “Hey, I know I’m probably a killjoy now, but I just wanted to make sure that X is all right with this conversation/joke/behaviour”. Being explicit about the fact that you know you are possibly ruining the so-called “good vibes” and changing the mood drastically, can for some make it easier to intervene.

But for the word “killjoy” to be a possible help for the people who find it hard to shift the mood in a situation, everybody needs to know what being a killjoy means and that the intention with speaking up about something is not at all about ruining any

“vibes” – it is about something much more important. It is about checking in and taking responsibility. That is why making the word “killjoy” a known phrase may be a tool you can use in your workplace to quickly signal that you are having doubts whether or not this situation is all right which is why you intervene.

How to speak up – examples

- “You might have crossed the boundary a bit there – are you sure that was okay?”
- “Remember it’s your colleague you’re talking to”
- “When you say things like that, some people might find it offensive – at least, I do”
- “The rest of us are working, so you should do the same”
- “You need to be careful about what you’re saying – one day you’ll say it to someone who finds it offensive”
- “We don’t treat each other like that here”
- “Would you like it if someone was like that to you?”
- “I’ll probably be a killjoy now – but maybe you shouldn’t talk like that?”

Or: “I heard that – are you okay? Did you find that uncomfortable?”



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Now it is time to talk about what sentences can be used to intervene in a possibly sexually harassing situation. Everybody is different and the important thing that you find sentences that you are most comfortable saying.

Here are some examples. You could for example say:

“You might have crossed the boundary a bit there – are you sure that was okay?”

“Remember it’s your colleague you’re talking to”

“When you say things like that, some people might find it offensive – at least, I do”

“If you had said that to me, I would have asked you to stop”

“The rest of us are working, so you should do the same”

“You need to be careful about what you’re saying – one day you’ll say it to someone who finds it offensive”

“We don’t treat each other like that here”

“Would you like it if someone was like that to you?”

“I’ll probably be a killjoy now – but maybe you shouldn’t talk like that?”

It is so important to remember that even if you don’t intervene in a situation you

thought might be sexual harassment – you can always, and *should* always, go to the person subjected to the possible sexual harassment after the incident and ask: “Are you okay? I saw what happened and I didn’t like it” Let them know that you noticed what happened and that you want to help or talk if they felt like their boundaries were crossed. Nobody is perfect and sometimes you just don’t intervene when you maybe should have. But you can always find the person afterwards to let them know you are there for them.

Someone reaching out often has a big positive impact on the person subjected to sexual harassment and it makes the person feel like they don’t have to carry the weight of the experience all by themselves. By letting the person know you also didn’t like what happened and that the person did not do anything to deserve this harassing treatment – that may spare the person of a lot of guilt or shame; feelings that many people subjected to sexual harassment carry with them, and it may make getting help a little easier.

Exercise

Write down five sentences that you
would be comfortable with
+ why these work for you



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Now I would like you to each spend 5-10 minutes where you write down five sentences that you would be comfortable with and why these work. You can create some yourselves or take inspiration from the sentences in the last slide. Also, write down or think about what it is with these sentences you chose, that make them work for you.

[When everyone is done, ask them to say their sentences them out loud, why they work for them and what it feels like to say them out loud – if the sentences feel right saying, or if they feel a big off. This can lead to a conversation among the participants' reflections about what is best to say, what may not be a good idea, why, and so on]

Responding to defensive comments

- “Relax, I didn’t mean it like that”
- “It was just a bit of fun”
- “If you can’t stand the heat, ...”
- “It was a compliment!”
- “What a dull workplace if we can’t even flirt a bit!”
- “She/he should stop inviting it/walking around in short skirts/wearing low-cut tops”
- “It really wasn’t that bad”



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Unfortunately, sometimes it is not enough to intervene, and then the possible harassment stops. Sometimes the harasser does not respond well to being asked to stop or be more mindful of a certain kind of behaviour.

To make intervening less uncomfortable it may be a good idea to think through what someone might say, if they get defensive about the fact that you intervene. Someone feeling like they are getting critiqued, that can trigger a variety of responses that does not make the situation any easier. And these defensive responses actually maintain a sexist culture which is why it is important to try to show that they are not all right.

Therefore, it can be a good idea to think through what to say in such a situation.

These are some of the responses that someone who is being defensive or oblivious to the possible consequences of their actions might say:

“Relax, I didn’t mean it like that”

“It was just a bit of fun”

“If you can’t stand the heat, ...”

“It was a compliment!”

“What a dull workplace if we can’t even flirt a bit!”

“She/he should stop inviting it / walking around in short skirts / wearing low-cut tops”

“It really wasn’t that bad”

What these comments have in common is that they deflect the fact that what has been said and done is no big deal, not important. These responses often try to establish that what someone experienced as crossing the line, is just an expression of humour, a casual tone in the workplace or that things should not be taken so seriously.

Or sometimes someone will say that flirting is an important part of a good workplace.

Or someone may truly think that what was said was meant as a compliment. But the relevant factor is not the intention, but how the so-called complement was received or experienced.

Responding to these defensive comments will vary from situation to situation and from person to person. What kind of relationship you have with the person making the defensive response, what kind of power you have in comparison to the other person, your own temperament and so on – that will all play into what you will be comfortable saying to these defensive comments.

Responses

- "Maybe you think it is funny – but I don't. So please be mindful of the fact that people have different understandings about what is funny."
- "I would be upset if you talked to me like that."
- "Flirting involves two people – it is not flirting if someone does not like it. So please stop deflecting by calling this flirting."
- "Everybody can dress exactly how they want to without having to listen to any of those kinds comments, so please stop."
- "It is not about standing any heat... It is about being respectful to each other."
- "I am completely relaxed. I just don't appreciate this kind of language/behaviour."
- "Well, I don't find that funny at all"
- "I know you probably didn't mean to say anything hurtful, but I really think you should think about how you may impact other people with what you say"



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Here are some possible responses to these kinds of defensive comments.

"Maybe you think it is funny – but I don't. So please be mindful of the fact that people have different thoughts about what is funny."

"I would be upset if you talked to me like that."

"Flirting involves two people – it is not flirting if someone does not like it. So please stop calling this flirting."

"Everybody can dress exactly how they want to without having to listen to any of those kinds comments."

"It is not about standing any heat... It is about being respectful to each other."

"I am completely relaxed. I just don't appreciate this kind of language of behaviour."

"Well, I don't find that funny at all"

"I know you probably didn't mean to say anything hurtful, but I really think you should think about how you may impact other people with what you say"

Just like thinking though beforehand what you might say in a situation where you intervene, it is a good idea to think through the possible defensive comments you might be met with. Then it will most likely be a lot easier to both respond to them and to respond to them in a proper way that suits the situation. Some people making

these kinds of defensive remarks may need language that is a little harsher and some people just need to be told in a nice way that just because they cannot see a problem, that does not mean that there isn't a problem.

To sum up of today's learnings:

- Preventing and dealing with sexual harassment is every co-workers shared responsibility
- Not intervening = passive support
- Intervening is difficult, but very important.
- Schedule a meeting where you discuss co-worker responsibility and how to intervene
- Become a killjoy
- Find what sentences work for you – and practice!
- If you don't intervene – reach out to the person afterwards.



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To sum up what we have been through today, here are some of the most important points that I hope you will take with you to your own workplace.

First of all, it is so important, in each workplace, to talk about and agree upon the fact that preventing and dealing with sexual harassment is everybody's business and that you all share responsibility for creating a sexual harassment-free work environment. Sharing responsibility for a harassment-free work environment means intervening when necessary, and supporting the colleagues who intervene.

Secondly, it is also important to start thinking about the fact that being a passive witness to something, you may think is sexual harassment, is a way to support the harassment. It may sound harsh, but that is unfortunately true. However, that does not mean that intervening is an easy thing to do. And that is why it is so important to discuss why and how to intervene very thoroughly in your workplace by setting up a formal meeting where you can bring up this topic in a safe and mindful way.

And introduce the word killjoy to your co-workers if it makes it easier for you to intervene.

It is so important that everybody finds words, sentences and a language that works for them so that they can intervene in a way that feels as comfortable as possible. And practice these sentences! This is very important if you want to act when a situation arises.

And at last, even if you don't intervene in a situation where you felt like something was off, then you should *always* reach out to the person who may have experienced sexual harassment. Talk to them, let them know you saw what happened and that you didn't like it. We don't always intervene when we have to, but we can – and should – always reach out to the person after the incident.

The knowledge that you have gained here is meant to serve as a help for you to start fostering co-worker responsibility in your workplace. Now you have the steps, the knowledge and the tools to start this important work.