

Responding to Sexual Harassment Disclosures



Responding to sexual harassment disclosures

This resource can be used by anyone in the workplace who may receive a disclosure or is responsible for responding to a workplace incident. This guidance provides information on clear, person-centred support to address unacceptable behaviours, including sexual harassment.

This does not supplement training, as this skill often requires in-person training to develop. However, it provides a quick reference guide for all those in receipt of a disclosure.

If you would like information about training by Working Women's Centre Victoria on preventing sexual harassment in your workplace, contact us info@wwcvc.org.au

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Working Women's Centre Victoria acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land where we work, and First Peoples language groups and communities across Victoria and Australia. We pay our respects to Elders past and present. We celebrate the people, traditions, culture and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the fight for survival, justice and Country. We thank the Traditional custodians for caring for Country for thousands of generations. Working Women's Centre Victoria recognises the ongoing impact of colonisation, dispossession and racism. As a Centre focused on work place rights, we acknowledge the history of exploitation Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have suffered working in the colony, denied access to their wages which were often simply stolen by corrupt officials and employers, and the ongoing exploitation and discrimination many First Nation people still experience at work today. We recognise that Sovereignty was never ceded and that this always was and always will be Aboriginal land.



The Working Women's Centre Victoria understands the term 'working women' means all women (this includes cis and trans women) and non-binary people (this includes people who are gender diverse, gender fluid, masculine or feminine) who meet our service eligibility criteria.

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A supportive and safe response

Anyone can be a person of trust, therefore it is critical that all employees receive guidance and support on how to respond to a disclosure of gendered violence or sexual harassment.

When an employee makes a disclosure, your first response is the most important. Their psychological and physical safety need to be prioritised, ahead of the formal reporting and disciplinary processes of the organisation or business.

The goal is to create a safe space where the individual feels heard and supported without pressure to take immediate action. Responding in a trauma sensitive way requires empathy, openness and a non-judgemental approach.

Key steps when responding:

1. **Actively listen:** Allow the person to share their experience at their own pace without interjecting or asking probing personal questions.
2. **Be strengths based:** Recognise their strengths in sharing the experience and the courage it took to disclose.
3. **Validate their feelings:** Affirm their emotions and experiences, making it clear that what they are feeling, however they are feeling, is okay; even if they do not know how they feel.
4. **Avoid blame or judgment:** Reassure them that they are not at fault and avoid any statements that could imply blame. To help avoid implying blame avoid asking questions about next steps rather than what happened. For example: "How can I help?" "Is there anything else you want to share" or "What actions do you feel comfortable with us taking next?"
5. **Offer support and resources:** Gently provide information about available support options, such as counselling or reporting mechanisms listed at the end of this resource, without pressuring them to take immediate action.
6. **Respect their autonomy:** Everyone responds differently, and it is important that the person affected has time and space to consider what is best for them. Allow them to decide what steps to take next and respect their decisions. They may differ from your preferences.

Example Scripts:

- "Thank you for trusting me with this. I'm so sorry you had to go through that, and I'm here to support you."
- "What happened to you is not your fault. You deserve to feel safe and respected."
- "I'm here to listen to whatever you want to share. Take your time."
- "It's completely understandable to feel the way you do. Your feelings are valid."

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- "If you'd like, I can help you connect with support or talk through your options, but it's entirely up to you."
- "You don't have to make any decisions right now. Take your time and let me know how I can best support you."

This approach enables the person to feel safe, respected, and empowered to make their own decisions, while knowing they are not alone.

A person centred and trauma informed approach to support

The way your workplace responds to incidents of sexual harassment must prioritise safety, dignity, and the prevention of further harm. This includes ensuring that systems, policies, and practices are trauma-informed and centred on the needs of the person affected. Find other resources and templates on preventing sexual harassment on the [Working Women's Centre Victoria website](#).

Your workplace should ask what support someone who has experienced sexual harassment needs and actively consider those needs when making any temporary adjustments to their role. Consideration should be given to a person's leave arrangements and any temporary changes to working arrangements or other reasonable adjustments.

This can occur through following the principles below:

- Prioritising the safety, privacy and wellbeing of the affected employee ensuring that confidentiality is maintained.
- Listening to them in a compassionate, non-judgmental and sensitive manner.
- Giving the person affected input and choice, including the choice not to pursue a report. For the person who wants to report the sexual harassment, offer a range of options (e.g., anonymously, over the phone, in-person) and choice about how to resolve a report.
- Handling reports fairly, impartially and reasonably in accordance with procedural fairness principles.
- Ensuring that all participants in the process have clear information about the process and how procedural fairness will be provided.
- Ensuring that responses are provided in a timely manner.
- Ensuring all affected employees have access to appropriate support(s).

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Being person-centred and trauma-informed is not about agreeing with every request – it's about making decisions that are **respectful, transparent, and guided by empathy**, while ensuring that **workplaces remain safe, fair, and legally compliant for everyone.**¹

Understanding trauma

Trauma refers to an event or events in which a person is threatened or feels threatened, overwhelming the person's capacity to cope. Trauma is common in cases of sexual harassment.

The impacts of trauma depend on someone's age/s, previous experience/s of trauma, how long the trauma lasts, how often it happens and how extreme it is as well as someone's culture, background and the social context of their life.

People respond to trauma in different ways including the responses of flight, fight, freeze or fawn. It is important not to judge the veracity or seriousness of the trauma based on how they respond at the time or after. Regardless of a person's coping strategy it is important to understand and respect them, while also acknowledging their potential harm.

Barriers to disclosing experiences of sexual harassment

In addition to the fear of re-traumatisation, which can occur when responses to disclosure are not safe or supportive, there are other barriers for someone formally reporting sexual harassment:

- Power dynamics between the affected person and the harasser, particularly for those in the early stages of their career.
- The belief that it's easier to keep quiet.
- Wanting to avoid confronting the harasser.
- Concerns about negative reactions from colleagues or the harasser.
- The belief that others would think they were overreacting.
- The perception that nothing would change as a result of reporting or making a complaint.

It is important that all policies and processes acknowledge and address these barriers. This includes providing multiple pathways for reporting, incorporating external anonymous

¹ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Factsheet Series: Positive Duty under the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Cth) – Person-centred and Trauma-informed approaches to Safe and Respectful Workplaces*, August 2023.

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reporting options, clear processes to ensure the person reporting is not victimised and clear processes to hold harassers accountable.

Support services in Victoria

If you or a colleague have experienced sexual harassment or other unacceptable behaviours, there are both internal and external support services. You can select a range of support services listed below and are also free to seek advice from someone at work, a friend, or a health professional.

Internal Support

If your workplace has a sexual harassment code of conduct or similar policy, refer them to those policies for guidance on internal support mechanisms. Internal support mechanisms can include trained HR or OHS staff as well as confidential counselling and support for personal or professional matters through your workplace's Employee Assistance Program provider (if your workplace has one).

Employee Assistance Program (EAP): If your workplace offers an EAP, this service can provide short-term support and general strategies for managing stress, personal issues, or workplace concerns. However, EAP practitioners may not always have specialised training in responding to gendered violence or sexual harassment.

Note: Not all workplaces provide an EAP, particularly smaller businesses or casualised environments. If an EAP is not available, or if you would prefer to speak with someone external, you can contact any of the services below.

External Support Services

1800 Respect 24/7 counselling for anyone affected by family violence or sexual assault.
Phone: 1800 737 732 **Website:** 1800respect.org.au

Lifeline 24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention service.
Phone: 13 11 14 **Website:** lifeline.org.au

13Yarn 24/7 culturally safe crisis support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
Phone: 13 92 76 **Website:** 13yarn.org.au

Mensline counselling and support for men.
Phone 1300 78 99 78 **Website:** mensline.org.au

Headspace support for young people aged between 12 and 25 years.
Phone: 1800 650 890 **Website:** headspace.org.au

Sexual Assault Crisis Line after-hours, crisis counselling service for sexual assault victims.
Phone: 1800 806 292 **Website:** sacl.com.au

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Legal Services

Working Women’s Centre Victoria free legal assistance about workplace issues for working women and non-binary people.

Phone: 1800 992 842 **Website:** www.wcvc.org.au

Q+ Law a safe entry point to access legal assistance for all Victorians who identify as part of the LGBTIQ+ community. **Website:** www.qlaw.org.au

Victoria Legal Aid assistance for people with legal problems including sexual harassment and discrimination. **Phone:** 1300 792 387 **Website:** legalaid.vic.gov.au/sexual-harassment

External reporting to regulatory bodies

If you would prefer to report the behaviour to someone outside of your current workplace, you can speak with:

- **Australian Human Rights Commission** – Website: humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination
- **Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission** – Phone: 1300 292 153
Email: complaints@veohrc.vic.gov.au. **Website:** humanrights.vic.gov.au.
People who have experienced sexual harassment may [lodge a complaint](#) to try and resolve the dispute via a dispute resolution process.
- **Fair Work Commission** support with workplace disputes. Website: fwc.gov.au/apply-or-lodge
- **WorkSafe** free OHS support and advice, reporting of sexual harassment including doing so anonymously. **Phone:** 1800 136 089. **Website:** worksafe.vic.gov.au/report-incident

In addition to the national and state-based regulators, your profession may have industry-based regulators, professional bodies or councils you can report to.

Victoria Police

If you are concerned for someone’s safety, or in an emergency situation, call 000 for urgent police assistance.

Acts such as indecent exposure, stalking, sexual assault and obscene or threatening communications (for example phone calls, letters, emails, text messages and posts on social networking sites) may also be offences under criminal law. A person who has experienced sexual harassment or sexual violence may want to report to the police by contacting local Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Team. police.vic.gov.au/sexual-offence-child-abuse-teams-centres