

## Ideas To Consider If You Have Been Harassed

Harassment is unwelcome conduct of a verbal, nonverbal or physical nature that is sufficiently severe or pervasive as to create a work or academic or living environment that a reasonable person would consider intimidating, hostile or abusive—and which unreasonably disrupts your educational, work, or living environment. Preparing to deal with harassment may depend on how much time you have. These guidelines offer ideas for three situations: when you must act immediately, when you have a few days, and when you want to prepare over a period of time.

**I. Is it an emergency?** If you or someone else is in immediate danger, seek emergency help. In asking for such help, report injuries and threats. If you can, say *who* was involved, *what* happened, *when* the harassment happened, *where* it happened, *how* it happened, and *who else*, if anyone, was there. If you can, also seek a person you trust to support you.

**II. If you have a bit of time, plan ahead before you act.** Drafting a private letter to the offender—even though you may well decide not to send it— can help you to develop, consider, and prepare for many options. (It costs no money, you stay in control of the facts and protect your privacy while drafting the letter, it helps with stress, you can take the time you need, and you can decide later how, if at all, you wish to use the letter.)

If you have not been able to think clearly or sleep, writing several drafts of a letter may make it easier to deal with rage and grief. And drafting a letter to the offender will prepare you to deal with the offense in many possible ways. (As a few examples, you might approach the offender directly, in person or on paper; seek informal third party intervention or formal mediation; make an anonymous report; file a formal grievance in your organization, or go to law enforcement authorities. You might ask for organizational commitment to approaches and policies that foster respect and help to *prevent* harassment.)

If you ultimately decide to postpone or forgo action, you may feel much less stressed if you have “drafted a letter.” You will have collected the evidence together in a way that may be useful if you change your mind. You may be able to work and sleep better.

If you have been hurt, if you are very angry, if you are at all afraid, you may find that you need to write several or many drafts. Please do seek confidential support from people you trust if you are very upset. Do not worry if your first drafts are messy and confused. Do not feel you must struggle with the tone of early drafts—no one else will see them. In fact the more upset you are, the more worthwhile it can be to write many drafts of a letter. Reviewing and rewriting may help you to recall and organize the facts about the harassment and its effects.

**How to draft a letter:** The letter should fit your particular situation exactly. The final draft would usually have three parts, described below—facts, feelings, and

your proposed remedy. Writing in this form can produce a letter in which the reader cannot *reasonably* disagree with any sentence. Separating the three sections can help to make the letter credible.

*In the first section*, begin without emotion. You might start with, "These are the facts as I perceive them about (what happened)." No feelings, judgments or opinions belong in this section. (This section may be very hard to write even after many drafts. If you later decide to send the letter, ask a trustworthy person to review whether the first section includes just facts.)

In serious cases it often may help for the factual section to include *all* the facts, with all relevant details. It must be scrupulously accurate, to be effective. The first section should be in plain language and "matter of fact." If you are not sure whether a statement is factual, and want to include it, then say, "I believe (this happened)" or "I think (this was the case)."

*The second section* is for opinions and feelings, and to describe, if you wish, how the harassment affected you. Consider describing the harm caused by the harassment, and your judgment about losses or injuries: "I can no longer work with you." "I was badly hurt; I could not work or sleep for weeks." "What you did was outrageous, and profoundly upsetting."

*The third section* is the place to state what you think should happen next, and, as appropriate, to ask for a specific remedy. "Our relationship must be on a purely professional basis from now on." "Since I was unable to go on this trip because of your behavior, I want immediate assignment to the next trip." You may wish to ask for any specific, appropriate remedy.

Drafting the letter can help you to consider all informal or formal actions you might take. When the drafting is finished, please consider talking with one or two trusted, confidential resources about the pros and cons of all potential actions.

Your actually *sending* a private letter to an offender should be weighed against other alternatives. As you think about this option, remember that once a private letter is sent, it belongs to the recipient, who then has control over it. The recipient may tell other people and may write you back to "set the record straight." On the other hand, *reading* a private letter of this type may help recipients to understand how harassment is harmful—even if they have been told before. And your sending the letter could be helpful in providing evidence if the behavior recurs. (A private letter provides evidence in addition to your word— both that you were offended *and* that you tried a civil, private way to get the offender to stop. If you send the letter, keep a copy.) Finally, letters often work; many recipients do change their behavior.

Consider carefully whether you might prefer to take your description of facts, feelings and harm to a manager or law enforcement—especially in response to illegal harassment, and if you believe that the offender should be punished or can only effectively be stopped by the authorities.

At the other end of the spectrum you might wish to draft the letter — and then not

send it. Some people consider forgetting an incident in the spirit of understanding different cultural customs. Some people prefer to try talking with an offender before sending a letter, alone or with an accompanying person. You could talk with the offender after giving the letter to him or her. Or you might prefer to ask for a third party just to intervene informally. You might work with a local affinity group about the problem, or ask your organization to review its policies, procedures and structures to prevent harassment.

**III. If you have time, you may wish to keep a diary.** If you are being harassed, keeping a diary helps to preserve your memories—and to document the facts, thoughts and feelings, as well as the effects of harassment. Keeping chronological notes in a bound and page-dated logbook or calendar can help in keeping evidence. There are also other reasons to write:

*If you cannot eat and cannot sleep*, if you are feeling upset and angry, bewildered, or in grief, the issues at hand may be very distracting. It may diminish distress to “keep a log” of what is happening, so your mind does not constantly struggle to understand and remember each event. You can keep notes and then tell yourself, “At least the facts are now safe; I do not need to keep thinking about them all the time.”

*If you are unsure about what is happening*, a diary can help you to collect all the facts. Good ideas may come as you write — or as you read back over the notes of previous weeks. Sometimes you may find that it is suddenly easier to see things clearly because of the notes.

*A diary may illuminate patterns in the events you describe.* A log may help you to analyze how and when the harassment occurs. Keeping a log may help if you are concerned about overreacting—or under-reacting. It may also be helpful to have a record of good things that are happening as well as harmful events—and to see when these occur.

*A diary helps in preparing for action.* Your notes can help you track—and then separate—the facts from your feelings and opinions and tracking of harm. The notes will be helpful if you decide to talk things over with a confidential support person or managers or other authorities. (Please remember that managers may be required to investigate and act on concerns that are brought to them.)

*Private notes are relatively easy to preserve.* You can keep your diary at home or in another safe place. You can collect and print relevant emails, photos, etc. (Carefully consider relevant issues about your privacy and that of others. And remember that you should get explicit permission beforehand, if you wish to record a conversation. Recording without permission is a felony in many jurisdictions.)

If you wish to have a safe back-up copy, but keep your notes private, you may mail a copy of your notes to yourself. If the matter is of great concern, collect the facts in some way that helps to date them—for example in a bound notebook. Seal a copy twice (one sealed envelope inside another) and send the copy by registered mail to yourself. The envelope or package can then be kept, still

sealed. Occasionally one might have reason to follow up with copies of “updates” mailed to oneself.

Harassment can be very painful, and dealing with harassment is often painful and difficult. It may help to write about what happened, and, especially, to find support from trusted resources, friends and family.