

If You Have Been Harassed or Bullied: Some Ideas to Consider

Preparing to deal with harassment and bullying 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 can deal with these issues over a period of time.

I. Is it an emergency? If you or anybody else is in immediate danger, seek emergency help. In asking for such help, report injuries and threats and if you believe someone poses a threat, report that also.

If you can, say *who* was involved, *what* happened, *when* the harassment or bullying 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. If it is not an emergency, but you feel unsafe, please think immediately about who can help you move to safety and with whom you can talk—so you are not dealing with this alone.

II. If you have a bit of time, plan ahead before you act. It may seem as if there is very little you can do. But you may have more power and options than you think; the ideas here may help you find strength and options. It may be useful to collect the facts and write what happened. For many people it helps to do this by drafting an imaginary letter to the offender. For many people it is easier—first, or instead—to keep a careful diary (described in **section III** below.)

Drafting an imaginary letter to the offender 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, it helps with stress, you can take the time you need, you can consult with people you trust, and you can decide later how, if at all, you wish to use the draft.)

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 may open the door for you to think of dealing with the offense in different ways. (As a few examples, you might approach the offender directly, in person or on paper with the facts. You might listen to others to see if they have been harassed or bullied by the same person; if others have been abused, this may change the situation. You might: 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 decide to ask relevant people for protection. You might also ask for organizational commitment and training in your workplace or community, to foster respect and require respectful behavior.)

If you ultimately decide to postpone action, 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 will be useful if you change your mind. You may be able to work and sleep better, after having drafted a letter.

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 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 re-writing may help you to recall, and organize, the facts about the harassment or bullying 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. Here is why: Writing in this form can produce a letter in which the recipient 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 down to earth. If you are not certain whether a statement is factual, and want to include it, then say, "I believe (this happened)." "I think (this was the case)." This wording can be helpful because a recipient cannot reasonably disagree with a statement about what you believe happened.

The second section is for opinions and feelings, and to describe, if you wish, how the behavior affected you. Consider describing the harm caused by the harassment or bullying, 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." "Your actions cost me a week's salary."

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 might 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 and bullying are harmful—even if they have been told before. Letters often work; many recipients do change their behavior.

In addition, your sending a private letter could be helpful in providing evidence if the behavior recurs, and especially if you face any retaliation. If you can demonstrate that the letter was delivered, 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 decide to send a private letter, keep a copy. Occasionally it may be useful to send the letter by registered mail or to ask a friend to be there, when you leave the sealed letter on the offender's desk, in order to demonstrate that you actually delivered the letter.

Consider carefully whether you might prefer to take your description of facts, feelings and harm to a formal grievance procedure or to a manager or law enforcement—especially in response to illegal harassment, and if you believe that the offender should be punished—or if you believe only the authorities will be able to stop the offender.

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 decide to wait and see if this happens again or to anyone else. 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 them. Or you might prefer to ask for a third party just to intervene informally. You might work with a local affinity group about harassment as an *issue*, or ask your organization to review its policies, procedures and training to prevent harassment.

III. If harassment or bullying happens repeatedly, you may wish to keep a diary. If you are being abused in any way, keeping a diary helps to preserve your memories—and to document the facts, thoughts and feelings, and the effects of harassment. Keeping chronological notes in a bound and page-dated logbook or computer calendar can help in preserving 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 somewhat 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, or do not know who the offender is, a diary can help you to collect all the facts. Helpful 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 or bullying occurs. Keeping a log may help if you are concerned about over-reacting—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 can 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. Or 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 and bullying can be very painful, and dealing with abuse of any kind is often painful and difficult. It may help to write about what happened, and please try hard to find trustworthy resources, friends and family so you are not alone.