

ALL-IN-ONE MEETING GUIDE

How to talk about sexual harassment

Overview

This guide is designed to facilitate conversation between people who have been sexually harassed and people who want to support them. You can use it with your Lean In Circle, in another small group, or with a partner.

Sexual harassment is hard to talk about. If you've been harassed, you may experience trauma, shame, or anxiety. If someone you know tells you they've been harassed, it can be hard to know what to say. No matter which side of the conversation you're on, this guide will help you talk about it in ways that bring comfort and empowerment. Each step is based on findings from research in psychology.

Given the topic of this guide, trust is critical. Before you start, we recommend that everyone in your group promise to keep what they hear confidential.

For a definition of sexual harassment and to learn more about the psychological harms it can cause, your group may want to review the key concepts in our discussion guide, [Self-Care After Sexual Harassment](#).



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Meeting agenda

🕒 *Approx. 80 minutes for total meeting (based on a group size of eight members)*

1 Learn how to listen well
🕒 *Approx. 20 minutes*

2 Share a difficult experience
🕒 *Approx. 30–70 minutes*

Meeting guide

Activity 1: Learn how to listen well

 *Approx. 20 minutes*

Step 1: Understand the importance of your response

 *Individual activity*

 *2 minutes*

Before your group begins the activities in this guide, remember that it's crucial to respond sensitively when someone discloses sexual harassment.

We know that respectful, compassionate, and attentive listening can be healing. By contrast, controlling, blaming, or invalidating responses can exacerbate the damage. Even well-intentioned responses can cause harm. The good news is we can learn to respond well, starting with the recommendations in this guide.

Step 2: Use attentive body language

 *Individual activity*

 *2 minutes*

The right body language can make someone feel supported when they are telling you they've been harassed. Individually or as a group, review these dos and don'ts:

- Sit upright and lean forward to show you're paying attention.
- Use gestures like nodding to encourage the speaker.
- Make appropriate facial expressions of sympathy and understanding. Avoid smiling or raising your eyebrows at inappropriate moments (for example, when hearing about a sad topic).
- Stay focused on the speaker. Don't fidget or interact with your phone.
- Maintain consistent eye contact—look directly at the person for periods of three to six seconds, then look away briefly before reconnecting.

Step 3: Do a body language check

 *Pair or group activity*

 *5 minutes*

Take a moment to focus on your own body language. Are your arms crossed? Are you leaning toward the group or away? What's your facial expression? Try changing your body language to signal empathy and compassion.

With the group or with your partner, take turns answering these questions:

- How did you feel when you used more attentive body language?
- How did it feel to see others in the group—or your partner—do the same?

Step 4: Find the right words

 Individual or group activity

 Approx. 10 minutes

When someone tells you about an experience of harassment, it's important to use language to support and encourage them. As a group or individually, read through these examples what to say and what not to say:

What to say

1. Focus on their experience rather than your own and only give advice when it's requested.
2. Offer affirming responses like “mmm,” “uh-huh,” or “oh my gosh” to convey that you're listening and engaged.
3. Name or reflect back the emotion being described:
 - “Wow—sounds like it was scary for you.”
 - “You must have felt very disappointed by that.”
 - “That must've made you angry.”
4. Ask questions that require more than one word in response. Instead of asking, “Was that scary?,” ask questions like:
 - “Could you tell me a little bit more about that?”
 - “What was it like for you?”
 - “What do you mean when you say _____?”
5. Validate the person's emotions in a sincere way:
 - “If that happened to me, I imagine I'd feel really overwhelmed too.”
 - “Given your experience, it makes sense you'd feel/say/do _____.”
 - “I think many people would have felt similarly.”
6. Point out the person's strengths:
 - “I'm amazed at how much courage that took.”

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- “You’ve done a great job keeping everything in perspective.”
 - “I’m impressed with how you’ve dealt with this.”

What NOT to say

1. Don’t change the subject or ask off-topic questions. Although this may seem like a way to avoid an uncomfortable conversation, it can hurt the person telling you their story.
2. Don’t immediately start talking about your own experience.
3. Don’t minimize the person’s experience in an attempt to reassure them. For example, these phrases aren’t helpful:
 - “That happened so long ago; maybe you should try to move on.”
 - “It’s not worth the energy to keep thinking about it.”
 - “Don’t be scared.”
4. Don’t make judgments about their responses or decisions. Avoid saying things like:
 - “Couldn’t you do/say _____ instead?”
 - “I don’t think you should worry about it anymore.”
 - “I think it’d be better for you to _____.”
 - “Why don’t you _____?”

Step 5: Reflect on your experiences of being listened to

 *Individual activity*

 *2 minutes*

Think back to how people have responded to you when you told them something difficult.

- Do you recall a time when you were met with an invalidating response?
- How did it make you feel?

Spend a few moments thinking about this experience. Then commit to doing your best as a listener.

Activity 2: Share a difficult experience

 *Approx. 30–70 minutes, depending on group size*

Step 1: Prepare to tell your story

 *Individual activity*

 *2 minutes*

Know the risks

Before you start this activity, it's important to recognize that sharing a difficult experience involves some risk. The person you share it with might respond in a way that hurts you, even if they mean well. Or the person you share it with might not keep your story private. We hope that the recommendations you've reviewed here will reduce these risks, and that this activity will be a positive experience. Trust your instincts and do what is most comfortable for you.

Decide which story to tell

Think of a difficult experience that you're willing to share. You're welcome to talk about an experience of sexual harassment. If you don't have one or don't want to share it, you can talk about another time when you were hurt, betrayed, or felt mistreated by someone close to you.

Step 2: Share your story with a partner

 *Pair activity*

 *Approx. 10 minutes*

Break into pairs and take turns sharing your story.

1. When it's your turn to share your story, you should start the conversation. You might begin, "Something happened to me recently that upset me, and I'd like to share it with you."
 - If at any time you feel uncomfortable about how the conversation is going, it's always okay to stop. You can say, "It's hard for me to talk about this."
2. If you're a listener, make sure to respect the person speaking and let them stay in control of the conversation. Remember to use attentive body language: nod, lean forward, and maintain consistent eye contact. Make affirming statements and ask open questions.
3. Then switch roles and repeat.

We suggest you note the time each person starts and try to wrap up within five minutes. You might want to take a brief break between your turns, sitting quietly for thirty seconds.

Step 3: Share your story with the group

 *Group activity*

 *Approx. 15–60 minutes*

Go around the group and ask if anyone feels comfortable sharing their story with the group.

Allow five minutes for each person to tell their story and for the listeners to respond and ask questions.

While you're listening, remember to follow the guidelines from Activity 1 above.

Step 4: Reflect on the experience

 *Group activity*

 *Approx. 10 minutes*

Take a moment to think about your experience.

- How did it feel when you were sharing? How does it feel now?
- What feelings did you have when listening? How do you feel about it now?

Share with the group what you felt in each role and what you found most helpful.

More resources

This discussion guide focuses on how you can support yourself and others after harassment. If you're looking for more information on your options for dealing with harassment, see our [resource page](#). You'll find links to legal information, advice on self-care, and perspectives from some of the many survivors of all genders who've bravely shared their stories.