

# LINE ON LIFE

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## Dealing with Sexual Harassment \*

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If you have had unwanted verbal or physical sexual advances – from sexual innuendoes or comments to unwanted touching – that make your environment uncomfortable or intolerable, this is **sexual harassment**. Sexual harassment occurs anytime unwelcome sexual conduct creates an intimidating or hostile situation. Although it may occur from a fellow worker or student, it typically comes from a supervisor or teacher as an inappropriate use of power. What can you do?

The first step is the hardest to take, since the offender typically has power over the victim. You need to **speak up** about the behavior to the offender – clearly state that the behavior is offensive, and indicate specifically how you want the behavior to change. (At this point, there is no need to threaten. All you need to do is make a clear request.) Some people are just not aware of the impact that their remarks or actions have. (If you never tell them, they will never know.) Once they realize this, if their intentions are merely friendly, they *will stop* – and probably apologize.

However, if the behavior does not change, then this is definitely sexual harassment. **Keep clear records** of each incident – dates, times, places, what was said and done by all involved. Be sure to include the names of witnesses. Gain social support by letting trusted friends know what is happening.

You now have good evidence to go up the **chain of command** to the offender's supervisor, manager, division head or dean. There should be no punishment for lodging a complaint. If the offender does not change the behavior, the supervisor should apply sanctions. You should not have to move or give up a position, unless you actually want that change. Involuntary removal should apply to the offender, not the victim.

If appropriate action is not taken by the immediate supervisor, **continue** up the chain of command with your complaints. Document the actions – or lack of them – at each level. Remind supervisors that they can be held responsible in cases of sexual harassment.

If you have exhausted all options available within the organization and are still not satisfied, other options are available. If it is at work, you can file a complaint with the **Federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (1-800-872-3362)**. If you plan to sue in federal court, you must first file a complaint with the EEOC.

Whether you **sue** in federal or state court, you can win considerable damages – although it may take years to resolve your case. Be sure you have a good lawyer, preferably one who specializes in this area.

Lastly, if you try to **ignore** sexual harassment, it will continue or increase. The choice is yours. Do you want to ignore the problem or leave – and feel like a victim all your life? Or to gain some control, do you want to take the effort and risk of challenging sexual harassment?

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\* Adapted from Jeffrey Turner and Laura Robinson's *Contemporary Human Sexuality*, Prentice Hall, 1993, pages 627-633.