

# How to Respond to Survivors of Sexual Harassment

## A Comprehensive Guideline for First Responders



### First Responder

The first person with whom someone chooses to share their experience of sexual harassment. Anyone may be a first responder to a disclosure of sexual harassment.

**As a potential first responder, you need to be aware of the following steps:**

**Listen to them.** Your role is to listen to the survivor with compassion. Be patient, let them speak at their own pace, and avoid interrupting them.

**Be empathetic.** Do not engage in victim blaming by saying, 'It's your fault', 'You must've provoked them', 'I know them and they are not a harasser.'

**Do not become judge/investigator.** Your role is not to investigate or judge the accuracy of statements. You don't have to agree with their life choices, but as a first responder, somebody a survivor has chosen to trust, it is your job to provide unconditional support. Determining the guilty is solely the job of the Sexual Harassment Inquiry Committee.

**Do not ask details about the incident,** or names of the parties involved. Do not ask probing questions that could make them uncomfortable or reveal more information about the incident than they wish to.

**Share resources.** Ask them what they need at that moment. Based on their expressed needs, i.e., if they wish to report the incident, seek medical help or counselling to cope with the trauma and stress from the harassment, inform them about available resources.

**Respect the survivor's privacy.** Do not share information about the survivor's harassment with anyone else or self-report without their consent.

**Support the survivor's decision.** It is not your role to decide how the survivor should proceed. Allow the survivor to make their own decision regarding reporting and seeking services. Provide information about support services so they are aware of the range of options available and can self-refer. This is critical for them to regain a sense of control and agency over the situation.

**Challenge statements of self-blame** by saying, 'It is not your fault', 'I believe you', 'You did nothing wrong'.

**Support them** in the form of validating statements: 'I am here for you', 'You are not alone', 'You are so brave'. Hold space for them. Remember that your response in these initial stages can lessen or worsen their trauma.

**Thank them** for being courageous, for trusting you and sharing their trauma with you. Tell them you are here for them if they wish to confide in you again.

