

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Steps to Take If You Experience Harassment or Discrimination at Work

Harassment and discrimination can occur in the workplace and many other places as well. If you experience or observe harassment or discrimination in your workplace, don’t stay silent. There are steps you can take to deal with it. Read on for an explanation of what constitutes workplace harassment and discrimination, and for guidance on what steps to take should you experience either.

What is harassment?

Harassment is deliberate and repeated behaviour meant to annoy, disturb, frighten, or irritate another person. The following are forms of harassment:

- threats
- racist, hostile, or demeaning remarks
- bullying
- ridicule or humiliation in front of others or privately
- derogatory words
- explosive outbursts
- intimidation
- use of racially derogatory words, phrases, or epithets
- demonstrations of a racial or ethnic nature such as a use of gestures, pictures, or drawings that would offend a particular racial or ethnic group
- ·negative comments about an employee's religious beliefs (or lack of religious beliefs)
- expressing negative stereotypes regarding an employee's birthplace or ancestry
- unwelcome sexual advances or romantic advances
- leering or staring in a sexually suggestive manner
- sending, forwarding or soliciting sexually suggestive letters, notes, emails or images
- touching in a way that may make an employee feel uncomfortable, such as patting, pinching, or intentional brushing against another's body
- persistent teasing
- conversation about personal topics that feels invasive or inappropriate
- making offensive remarks about looks, clothing or body parts
- ·negative comments regarding an employee’s age

The harasser could be someone on your team, a supervisor, supplier, or customer. Statistics show that women report being harassed more frequently than men do.

What is discrimination?

Discrimination is the unjust or prejudicial treatment of people belonging to a particular group. Discrimination can be based on any of a number of factors: race, religion, age, gender, disability, national origin, pregnancy, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression and actions or beliefs. Discrimination can come from attitudes that people don’t even realise they have, or don’t realize are wrong, but this doesn’t excuse discriminatory behaviours or beliefs.
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Discrimination can take many forms in the workplace, including the following:

- denial of equal access to jobs, promotions, or other employment opportunities
- harassment in the workplace by colleagues, supervisors, or customers (see above section)
- harassment because of membership in a specific group

To determine if you are a victim of discrimination, ask yourself these questions:

- What makes me believe that I was treated differently? Were there specific things said or done that clearly suggest improper treatment?
- How are others like me treated in similar situations?
- How are others who are not like me treated in similar situations?
- Do others know that I'm included within what is now classed as a protected characteristics (for example, that I have a disability or that I am gay)?

The harm caused by harassment and discrimination

Harassment and discrimination can take a very damaging toll. People who are harassed may feel afraid to go to work, or anxious and afraid at work. They may experience physical and emotional symptoms, such as headaches, stomach problems, sleep disturbances and other symptoms of stress.

Harassment also hurts productivity. It can cause division in a work group, lowered morale and increased absenteeism. The person being harassed may even leave or change jobs. They may also take legal action against the organization.

Discrimination in the workplace can be just as toxic. Victims of discrimination may feel excluded, stressed at work, or resentful of the unfair treatment they may be receiving. They may also take legal action against the organization.

If you are experiencing harassment or discrimination at work

Reporting harassment, racism, and discrimination is usually the best way to stop it. Sometimes people who are experiencing harassment or discrimination are afraid to report it for fear of being punished or even of losing their jobs. However, company harassment and discrimination policies have safeguards in place to protect people from reprisal. There are laws against harassment and discrimination in the workplace as well as in other settings.

If you feel you are being harassed or discriminated against at work, it is important to take action.

Review your organization's policy on harassment or discrimination, which may be found either in your employee handbook or on your organisation's intranet. These may give you guidelines for resolving the issue.

Contact your human resources (HR) representative about what procedure to follow to report an incident of harassment or discrimination. Your HR representative will guide you on next steps.

You can also discuss your concerns with your assistance program. Your program can provide private and confidential guidance and support and help you deal with the situation.

Seek support immediately if you feel threatened. If confronted with a serious incident such as name calling or an act of hatred, do not try to respond alone or immediately. You risk making the situation even worse. It is best to seek help from others, perhaps even police. Your HR department and your EAP can also provide assistance.

By reporting harassment or discrimination and doing something about it, you keep the problem from escalating. Employees who report harassment or discrimination experience fewer symptoms of stress

and feel better about their jobs than employees who don't report it. Harassment and discrimination are never acceptable—not in the workplace, or anywhere else.

This is not intended to be legal advice and cannot replace a consultation with a lawyer.