



# Safer Spaces

CREATING SEXUAL HARASSMENT FREE WORKPLACES  
IN BC'S TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

## RESPONDING TO A DISCLOSURE

### Best practices for Receiving & Responding to Disclosures of Workplace Sexual Harassment

If someone discloses their experience of sexual harassment to you, your reaction could significantly impact what they choose to do next. It is common to feel unsure about what to say when receiving a disclosure, but you have an opportunity to provide non-judgmental support and information. Here are some general tips on what to say and do when receiving a disclosure of sexual violence:

#### Disclosing is not reporting

*Disclosing* workplace sexual harassment is not the same as *reporting* workplace sexual harassment. An employee disclosing sexual harassment might be seeking support or accommodation but they don't wish to make a formal report. First and foremost, you'll want the complainant to feel at ease. Disclosing is not easy, and you do not want the disclosure to add to the feelings of trauma. As a supervisor or employer, you will want to have different approaches to disclosing and reporting. What will remain the same is providing an empathetic and caring response.

#### Reporting considerations

Ensure that the employee is comfortable reporting to you and offer an alternative to them if they rather speak to another Manager/Supervisor.

#### Validate their experience

If a bystander is disclosing something to you, you'll want to apply the same approach as you would with the complainant. They may have feelings of guilt or shame (I should have intervened sooner), or intense worry for the target of sexual harassment. It can also be re-traumatizing if the witness has experienced sexual harassment in the past.

#### Treat the complainant with respect

Workers usually find it very difficult to make allegations about sexual harassment. They worry about the consequences and the effect the complaint will have on others in the workplace. They may feel vulnerable and concerned about losing their jobs.

As an employer, it's important to take an empathetic approach and show respect, understanding, and concern.



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## Ensure Privacy

Provide a safe, private and comfortable space: an office with the door closed, in the workplace at a time when others aren't there, a meeting room, or at a place that the employee chooses.

Do not touch or hug the person without their permission; limit distractions by silencing and putting away your phone, or shutting down your desktop email. You might ask the person if they'd like to relocate, or where they'd like to sit.

## Be mindful of the impact of intersectionality

As we highlighted earlier, there is often a compounding aspect for targets of sexual harassment. Some people are more vulnerable than others. Know when to offer support specific to the needs of people from one or more of these communities.

## Don't dismiss or belittle disclosures

Someone who discloses sexual harassment feels that they have experienced inappropriate behaviour of a sexual nature. While the perpetrator may not have intended to cause harm, that is the impact of their actions. The psychological impacts may be significant, traumatizing and potentially triggering of previous experiences of sexual harassment. When you receive a disclosure of a "minor" incident, respond, support and accommodate as you would if it were a "serious" incident.

## Be clear on the limits of confidentiality

Every employee who discloses workplace sexual harassment should be informed as to the limits of confidentiality, as per applicable federal and provincial laws. Know the limits and communicate them at the earliest opportunity.

## Practice Empathetic Listening

You want to create space for the employee to tell their story but remember it's not an interview or interrogation. Listen with empathy and patience: The best way to seek to understand what has happened and its impact is to listen closely and without judgment. Use open body language and allow the person disclosing to set the pace for the conversation.

## Be mindful of your body language

Providing non-verbal cues will help to communicate your empathy, care and support. Here are some ways you can communicate non-verbally:

- Eye contact - make eye contact, but don't stare intently. Be mindful of cultural norms around eye contact as well. In some cultures, making eye contact is not common and can create discomfort. If you make eye contact, do it intentionally and respectfully. If the employee feels shame or embarrassment, they may avoid eye contact.
- Lean in - your posture sends a message as well. When you lean in, it tells the other person "I'm listening." Be aware, however, to not invade the person's personal space.



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- Nod occasionally or use other gestures that convey you are paying attention. It will help to relieve some of the anxiety that the employee may be feeling as they tell their story.

## Provide Resources

While the employee and the witness may not want to make a formal complaint, you can provide information on how to do so if they change their mind. You can also offer to find other resources, like the number to your Employee Assistance Program or connect them with a mental health professional. If the worker is not comfortable coming to you directly, ensure that a trusted colleague can provide the resources they need.

### Resources:

- Non-verbal communication
  - [Non-verbal Communication](#)
- Reporting procedure
- - [WorkSafeBC Harassment Reporting procedures](#)