

Trauma informed grievance handling

Tips sheet

It is important that those responsible for dealing with reports of sexual harassment and investigations (such as first responders, leaders, or Human Resources) understand trauma and adopt a trauma-informed approach when handling cases of workplace sexual harassment.

This tip sheet provides an overview of key trauma informed interviewing techniques and approaches.

Prior to interview commencing

- Ensure a comfortable, quiet, and private space for the interview, and have water and tissues available.
- Give the interviewee a sense of control by allowing them to choose where to sit.
- Have a pen and paper or 'fidget object' for interviewee to fidget with.
- Offer of support person (this should occur when the meeting is initially organised).

Beginning of Interview

- Build some rapport

For example:

- Begin with some simple questions regarding the person's role or background that will allow them to observe your interview style before you begin to discuss more difficult topics.
- Ask how they are feeling about being interviewed and acknowledge the difficult situation the person is involved in (without expressing your opinion).
- Offer a drink of water.

- Tell them from the start that it is ok for them to ask for a break whenever they feel they need it.
- Be transparent; explain your role and what you'll be asking.
- Talk about privacy and confidentiality.
- Be prepared to offer a motivational statement that will encourage participation.

For example, if applicable:

- it can be helpful to let the interviewee know they are not alone, that others have also come; or
- we are talking to lots of employees about this situation. Your experience will help management put together a complete picture of what happened.

Opening the conversation

- When interviewing someone who has been through a traumatic incident, allow them to tell their story without frequent interruptions.
- Recognise the signs of trauma and be alert for them. These signs include (among other things) lack of focus, fragmented or inconsistent memories, memory gaps, nervousness, confusion, disorientation, exhaustion, anxiety, and blunt affect.

Tips:

- Rather than leading with, "Start at the beginning," investigators can say, "Start where you feel comfortable," or "Tell me what you remember."
- Asking, "What else happened?" or "What else do you remember?" can be more productive when trauma is present.

Responding

- Neutral investigators can show empathy by recognising the difficulty of the complaint process without acknowledging that an incident took place.
- Consider what you are bringing to the table. Be aware of your own issues, experiences, and biases and how they might affect your questioning. If you are reacting in a negative way during an interview, take a break and consider why this is happening.

Tip:

- Use phrases like, "*I can see this is hard for you to talk about,*" can show empathy without confirming any factual basis.

Asking follow-up questions

- Once the interviewee has provided their account, the investigator can then circle back to ask some follow-up questions for clarification.
- Be conscious of your word choice and not to influence a particular response through leading questions. By way of example:

- In an experiment on the impact of leading questions, students were asked to watch films of road accidents and estimate the *cars' rates of speed at the time of the collision*. The question was framed a number of different ways in respect of the same accident using different verbs in place of the word 'collision', such as "smash", "bump", "hit", or "contact". Based on which verb was used, students changed the estimated speed of the vehicles. When asking, "what speed were the cars travelling when they smashed?", the students estimated the cars travelled at 40.8 mph, the fastest rate. However, the verb "contacted" drew an estimated speed of only 31.8 mph from the students, the slowest rate.
- Sense memories can be a key to unlocking other memories – asking about these sense memories, like sounds, smells, sights, and touch, can enable a victim to begin remembering and talking about what happened in a manner that provides significantly more information.

Other questions investigators can ask include:

- What was your thought process during the event?
- How did you react physically? Emotionally?
- What was the most difficult part of the experience for you?
- Is there something about this experience that you can't forget?
- You could ask '*do you recall any particular sound or smell in the moments after the [insert traumatic event] occurred?*' Once the interviewee begins exploring their sense memories it may help enhance ability to recall other details.

Closing the interview

- Conclude the questioning by showing empathy to the witnesses while still using language appropriate to a neutral process. Thank the witnesses for their cooperation and acknowledge that these are difficult subjects to talk about.
- If the organisation has resources for the witnesses, such an Employee Assistance Program or other counselling, the investigator can make sure the witnesses know about these resources.

After the interview

- Provide updates to the witness and others, as agreed or required by your policy.
- Be aware that vicarious or secondary trauma can occur for investigators and others involving in handling sexual harassment incidents, can occur especially when they have repeated contact with people who are themselves traumatised, although even limited exposure can bring on secondary trauma.

Tip:

- Self-care techniques for an interviewer, such as talking with a colleague or therapist, engaging in physical activities like hiking or exercise, and enjoying music or other artistic endeavours are important components of a successful trauma-informed approach to the interview process.

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