

Sexual Harassment at Work: Being an active bystander

Sexual harassment at work is common – 1 in 5 workers in Australia have experienced it in the past 12 months¹. People who witness sexual harassment at work can take action to support someone who has experienced it and prevent it from happening again. This is called being an active bystander.

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What can sexual harassment at work look like?

Sexual harassment includes unwelcome physical touching, staring or leering. It can also include sexual comments or jokes, repeated or inappropriate requests to go on dates, and intrusive questions about a person's private life or body².

Who is an active bystander?

An active bystander is someone who notices sexual harassment and takes action to prevent it, interrupt it, or support the person experiencing the harassment. These actions can:

1

be immediate or can occur after the incident

2

involve either the harasser or the person who has experienced harassment.

Why do workplaces need active bystanders?

Active bystanders are important to interrupt, de-escalate, support targets of harassment, and prevent sexual harassment at work. Yet:



1 in 4 workers said they **would not take any form of active bystander action** if they witnessed sexual harassment



only 1 in 3 workers said they **would check in with the target** of sexual harassment following the incident³.

What are active bystander actions?

There are a range of actions you can take to be an active bystander, including:



Subtle actions such as making a light comment to interrupt the behaviour or showing disapproval through body language, checking in with the person who was the target of harassment, talking with them about what happened, or offering advice and support.



Direct actions include telling the harasser to stop, speaking with the perpetrator later about their behaviour, supporting the target to make a report, reporting the incident to the employer, or offering to provide a witness statement.

How can I be an active bystander?

There are many ways to be an active bystander at work, at the individual level as well as actions for people leaders. Make sure you consider your safety and the safety of others before taking action, and use Our Watch's four-step approach to taking bystander action at work⁴.

1 Speak	Say something to challenge the behaviour (if it's safe to do so), e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Question sexist jokes – 'I don't get what's funny?'• Focus on the behaviour – 'That comment was out of line'• Purposely change the topic – 'Seriously? Let's move on'• Ask them to stop – 'Alright, that's enough'
2 Show	If you aren't comfortable speaking up, you can challenge harassment and disrespect through your actions, e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Roll your eyes• Shake your head• Don't laugh along• Walk away• Stand between the person being disrespectful and the person being harassed
3 Support	Let the person experiencing harassment or discrimination know that you are there for them, e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ask if they're OK in person or in a message• Acknowledge what happened: 'Hey, I'm sorry. That wasn't ok'• If someone else says something, back them up• Support people who report sexism and disrespect to management or People & Culture
4 Report	It's important that your workplace's leadership team know about sexual harassment and discrimination occurring at work. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Talk to your manager or People & Culture about what you saw• Share your ideas for how you can improve workplace culture and safety• If you don't feel comfortable talking to management, speak to a trusted colleague

Some workplace environments carry higher risk, like those with:



gender-imbalanced leadership and workforces



a high casual workforce



frequent contact with customers or patients



alcohol-centred socialising

1. Diversity Council Australia, "[Sexual Harassment and Inclusion@Work](#)", 2026, DCA, Sydney, NSW.
2. AHRC [Work-related sexual harassment – Know your rights | Australian Human Rights Commission](#).
3. Diversity Council Australia, "[Sexual Harassment and Inclusion@Work](#)", 2026, DCA, Sydney, NSW.
4. OurWatch, "[Standing up to sexual harassment at work](#)", n.d.