



Australian
Human Rights
Commission



Rape &
Domestic Violence
Services Australia

Sharing experiences of bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault

A guide for participating in the Independent Review into
Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces

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1 Purpose of the Guide

The Australian Human Rights Commission (Commission) is conducting an Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces (Review).

The Review aims to understand the culture of Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces. Recommendations will be made as part of the Review to ensure that these workplaces are safe and respectful and reflect best practice in the prevention of and response to bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault.

As part of this Review, the Commission is inviting people who currently work in or have previously worked in Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces to share their experiences, both positive and negative, and expectations on ensuring a safe and respectful workplace.

The Commission expects to hear a broad range of experiences. This may include some people who have experienced bullying, sexual harassment and/or sexual assault in

Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces. While sharing personal experiences can be difficult for anyone, the Commission understands the particular impacts that sharing may have on those who have experienced trauma. As such, this guide has been developed to provide information to those who may have experienced trauma on:

- how you can share your experiences
- how your privacy and information will be protected
- how participating in the Review may impact people who have experienced trauma, such as bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault
- things to consider prior to, during or after participating in the Review.

What is bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault?

- **Bullying** is commonly understood as repeated and unreasonable behaviour, that's directed towards you or a group that you are part of and creates a risk to your physical or mental health and safety.
- **Sexual harassment** is commonly understood as an unwelcome sexual advance, unwelcome request for sexual favours or other unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature which, in the circumstances, a reasonable person, aware of those circumstances, would anticipate the possibility that the person would feel offended, humiliated or intimidated.
- **Sexual assault** is commonly understood as an act of a sexual nature carried out against a person's will through the use of physical force, intimidation or coercion, including any attempts to do this. This includes rape, attempted rape, aggravated sexual assault (assault with a weapon), indecent assault, penetration by objects, forced sexual activity that did not end in penetration and attempts to force a person into sexual activity. Incidents so defined would be an offence under state and territory criminal law.

2 How can I share my experiences?

You can share your experiences by making a written submission or participating in an interview.

If you are making a written submission, you can decide if you want to be anonymous or if you want to be identified. And you can decide if you want your experiences to be published or remain

confidential. Participating in an interview is confidential.

It is also your choice to share as much or as little of your experiences as you want. You can choose to answer or not answer the questions in the submission form or as part of the interview.

Participating in the Review will not involve you having to substantiate or prove your claim—you have the right

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to share your experiences and to be believed.

You can share your experiences with the Commission even if you are not sure your experience fits the definitions of bullying, sexual harassment or sexual assault.

You can also participate in the Review and share your experiences, if you have not directly experienced bullying, sexual harassment or sexual assault, or have been a witness, bystander or know of someone who has.

3 Making an informed choice

It is important to make an informed decision and to be able to decide if participating in the Review is right for you.

If you are not sure you want to participate, you can talk to someone on the Review Team at the Commission who can provide you with information on ways to participate in the Review and on available supports.

You may also wish to talk to a counsellor at a support service (see list of national services at the end of this guide) who can offer you

support and help you understand your experiences.

You can change your mind about participating and withdraw up until two weeks after the close of consultation. It is expected that interviews will conclude, and submissions will close at the end of July 2021. Further information on this can be found in the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form.

4 How will my privacy and information be protected?

The information you provide may be used in the public report and other resources produced by the Commission, but it will not be attributed to you, and it will not be used if its use could identify you or others.

The *Archives and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2021* (Cth) provides additional protections to ensure confidentiality and means that your experiences will be exempt from the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (Cth) and will not come into an open access period under

the *Archives Act 1983* (Cth) for 99 years.

Your information will be stored under the *Archives Act 1983* (Cth), the *Privacy Act 1988* (Cth) and the *Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986* (Cth).

5 How might participating in the Review impact people who have experienced trauma?

If you have experienced trauma, sharing your experiences in person or in writing may be an important step for you to take as part of your recovery.

Sharing your experiences may be empowering. It can help you to take action that you may have not been able to take at the time, to voice your experience and to break the silence that can surround bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault.

It can also be an opportunity to realise that you are not alone and that others have shared your experience.

You may also want to be part of the cultural change to create workplaces

that are safe and respectful for everyone.

However, it is important to be aware of the potential impacts of participating and to seek support to assess, make decisions and manage them.

Many people feel nervous sharing their experiences, especially if they have previously not being believed or have had bad experiences reporting what has happened to them in the past. It is also possible that impacts of trauma related to your experience of bullying, harassment and abuse may come to the surface.

It is OK if you don't feel safe to share your experiences right now.

6 What should I consider prior to, during or after participating in the Review?

In deciding whether to participate or in preparing to participate, you may like to consider a number of things.

6.1 Your choice, not your responsibility

People who have experienced trauma sometimes feel like they should speak up in order to protect others from the same thing happening to them or they feel guilty that they didn't speak up at the time.

It is important to remember that you are not responsible for what happened to you (the perpetrator is always responsible) and you are not responsible for creating safe workplaces (the employer is always responsible). Not everyone is ready to speak up and that is OK.

6.2 Impacts of trauma

Bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault commonly result in trauma. Trauma occurs when our ability to cope is overwhelmed.

Trauma can have a significant effect on your physical, emotional and psychological well-being. The impacts of trauma may surface at any time, and, in particular often surface when survivors tell or repeat their experiences. Impacts include:

- *Panic and anxiety*
- *Fear about the world being dangerous and unsafe*

- *Nightmares*
- *Insomnia*
- *Mood swings*
- *Hyper vigilance and heightened stress response*
- *Difficulty concentrating*
- *Emotional numbness*
- *Depression*
- *Low mood and changes in cognition*
- *Intrusive thoughts and memories*
- *Avoidance of certain people and situations.*

6.3 Do you have support?

It is important to build in a good support network—friends, family, and professional support.

A good support person will be available when you need them and will provide the type of support you may want and need at different stages of the Review.

A supporter may be a friend, family member or advocate. It may also be a professional.

For example, if you are participating in an interview, you can bring a support person with you.

If you are making a written submission, you can have a support person with you as you write it.

You might like to arrange access to a counsellor before, during and after participation.

6.4 What stage are you in your recovery?

Recovery from traumatic experience happens in stages.

Some people may have never spoken about what happened to them. Speaking for the first time is often very difficult.

Before participating in the Review, you may prefer to speak about your experience to friend or family member or a trained professional to help you decide what is best for you at this particular time.

If you have already told someone about what happened to you may feel ready to share your experiences.

However, even if you feel very ready to speak up, it may be helpful to seek additional professional support to help you manage the impacts of re-telling your experiences. This is because it is typical for at least some of the impacts of trauma to emerge or re-emerge if we retell our trauma.

Remember, you are the expert in your own needs and your own well-being. It is important to have a range of self-care and safety strategies in place that you know you can rely on.

6.5 What are you hoping to get out of your participation?

It can be helpful to take some time to reflect on what your objectives are and if the Review can meet those expectations.

The Review is an opportunity to make your voice heard and be part of a change process to make Parliamentary workplaces safe and respectful and to make improvements in the prevention and response to bullying, sexual harassment, and sexual assault.

Remember, the Review will not be investigating or making findings about individual allegations.

6.6 Do you feel safe to share your experiences?

If you felt unsafe at work and unsafe to report your experiences at the time, you may feel nervous and unsafe about participating in the Review now.

There may also be cultural, historical or other experiences or factors that

will impact how safe you feel to share your experiences.

you have shared in the public domain now and in the future?

6.7 If you are making a written submission, do you want to remain anonymous or do you want to be identified?

Publishing your written submission with your name may be empowering. However, it is worth considering:

- Is there anyone in your family or friends who don't already know of your experience and you would like to tell first?
- Are you able to respond to people who may contact you if they read your experiences? This may include family members, friends, other victims/survivors who may disclose their own experiences. How will you get support for yourself and them if that happens?
- What are your strategies to manage any intrusive questions or comments from people you do and don't know?
- Are you comfortable with your name being attached to what

It is OK to choose to remain anonymous. It will allow you to share your experiences and maintain your privacy. If you choose to have your experiences published as anonymous, the Commission will remove any identifying information.

7 Where to from here?

- Talk to a member of the Review Team to find out more
- Talk to a friend or family member
- Talk to a counsellor
- Take the time to make the best decision for you.

8 Where to get support (national counselling and support services)

1800RESPECT

A national sexual assault, domestic and family violence counselling and information referral service (available 24-hours a day, 7 days a week).

<https://www.1800respect.org.au/>

Ph: 1800 737 732

Beyond Blue

A national, independent, not-for-profit that provides information about depression and/or anxiety and referrals to mental health support services (available 24-hours a day, 7 days a week).

<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/>

Ph: 1300 22 4636

Lifeline

A national service that offers a 24/7 crisis support telephone service (available 24-hours a day, 7 days a week).

<https://www.lifeline.org.au/>

Ph: 131 114

Bravehearts

Provides specialist child sexual assault and exploitation counselling and support services.

www.bravehearts.org.au

Ph: 1800 272 831

For information on other national and state and territory support services, including sexual assault and crisis services please visit:

<https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/list-support-services>