

Responding to Sexually Inappropriate Behavior - Language Tip Sheet

What should I say?

This tip sheet will help provide you with some options of language to use to confront someone who is being sexually inappropriate. Only you can decide what type of language feels comfortable for you, so you may need to adjust the wording until it feels right. If you can't find the right words or you are afraid of retaliation, seek help from human resources (HR), a member of management, or any individual/group with responsibility for employment issues within the County.

This tip sheet is not intended to be used if you feel threatened in any way. In that situation, you should seek help from HR or a member of management. Depending on the level of threat, you may choose to seek help by calling 911.

Language to use when you are the person who is uncomfortable:

- I don't think the language you used just now is appropriate in the workplace.
- I prefer to keep my work and personal lives separate; please don't send me text messages unless they pertain to work.
- Our work relationship is important to me. I want to keep things friendly but professional, and I don't like jokes with sexual innuendo. Please do not tell me that kind of joke anymore.
- I'm not comfortable when people stand as close to me as you are right now. I prefer more personal distance.

Below are tips that experts have recommended, but you as an individual will need to decide what works best for you and what you are comfortable with:

- Use "I" statements instead of "you" statements: "I don't think jokes about gender stereotypes are funny," versus "You should not joke about that." This makes it clear you are only speaking about your own opinion, rather than judging the individual.
- Don't apologize or make excuses for not wanting to be harassed.
- Use strong body language and look the person in the eyes.
- Remain as calm as you can; deep breathing can help with this.
- Get the message out clearly and do not get into an argument with the person.
- Use contrast to clarify misunderstandings. (e.g., "I don't want a romantic relationship. I do want us to have an effective work relationship.")
- Avoid "absolutes" (always, never, etc.) because they tend to result in a defensive posture.
- Address the behavior instead of labeling the person: "I don't want you to touch me," versus "I think you are a jerk."

- Avoid gossiping and rumor spreading, but don't suffer in silence. If a situation or person is bothering you, tell a supervisor, manager or HR.
- Be ready for a possible negative reaction. People can feel attacked when confronted and can get angry. If the reaction is extreme, tell the person you will be happy to meet with them when they have had some time to calm down, or get help from HR or a member of management.
- Leave when you are done talking.

Always remember you can get help from a supervisor, manager, department director, county administrator, the county attorney, or the HR department. You do not have to handle the situation by yourself if you do not wish to or if you are afraid of retaliation.

Language to use when you are the bystander:

Sometimes, as an employee, you may overhear an inappropriate comment or observe an improper action as a bystander. These inappropriate comments or actions could involve employees, elected officials, contractors, or the public. As a bystander, you have a powerful role in promoting a respectful workplace because even though you may not be directly involved with the initial interaction, you still have the power to change the outcome.

There are likely a wide range of approaches a bystander can consider in these situations. Depending on the situation, one or more of the following responses may be useful:

- Say to the person making the inappropriate comments, "Hey, that joke wasn't funny."
- Ask the person you perceive to be uncomfortable a question that will remove them from the situation, such as, "Hey, do you want to meet over here in this conference room?" or, "Can you take a call?" or "Do you know what time it is?"
- If you have a friendly relationship with the person making the inappropriate comments, you might try appealing to their empathy and ask them how they would feel if someone said something similar to them or to a loved one: "How would you feel if someone said that to your sister?"
- Help a fellow employee who may be the victim of a harassing situation feel like they are not alone by saying, "I noticed that happened. Are you OK with that?" Depending on the situation, you may also have a responsibility to reach out to a supervisor or HR to report the concern.

Special notes for supervisors and managers:

Individuals in a position of authority including supervisory, management or lead roles have additional responsibilities to appropriately and promptly address, investigate, and follow up on all complaints of sexual harassment or sexually inappropriate behavior in the workplace. Supervisors, managers, lead workers or others in a leadership role should consult with human resources, the county administrator or county attorney if they have any questions regarding how to appropriately and timely address a concern that has come to their attention.