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Sexual Abuse and Sexual Harassment

Anyone can experience sexual abuse or sexual harassment. These situations often emerge in circumstances where there is an imbalance of power. It can happen between people who know each other and between strangers. It's never okay. Living with the aftermath can be traumatic, and it's important to give people the right kinds of support to begin to heal.

In this article, we will talk about the differences between these two terms and share some examples of situations. We hope that in reading this article, you will gain a better understanding and be able to recognize some of the signs that someone may be experiencing sexual abuse or harassment. You'll also get a sense of how widespread these problems are as we share some statistics. Finally, we'll share some helpful resources that you can use or share to help others.

What is the difference between sexual abuse and sexual harassment?

Sexual abuse and sexual harassment are both forms of sexual violence where there is an incident involving unwanted sexual contact.¹ It's important to recognize that sexual violence can include people who know each other, are in relationships or are

strangers. These acts can happen both in-person and online. Sexual violence occurs when there is a breakdown or absence of consent in a situation. Consent in this context is a voluntary agreement to participate in sexual activity where there is no impaired decision-making or pressure to do so against someone's will. Consent should never be assumed or inferred, even within relationships. It also can be withdrawn at any time.

Here are some differences between sexual abuse and sexual harassment:

Sexual Abuse is...

- "any form of sexual violence, including rape, child molestation, incest and similar forms of non-consensual sexual contact"²
- Considered a criminal act.

Sexual Harassment is...

- "any conduct, comment, gesture, or contact of a sexual nature that is likely to cause offence or humiliation"³
- Can be considered criminal harassment.

Types of sexual abuse and sexual harassment

Sexual abuse

With sexual abuse, usually, the abuser has power in the relationship and demands unwanted sexual touching, exposure of body parts, advances, non-touching abuses, trafficking, prostitution, and pornography.

Non-touching abuse could include⁴:

- Being shown videos or sexual pictures
- Being forced to listen to sexual talk or comments about one's body
- Being forced to pose for seductive or sexual photographs
- Being forced to look at sexual parts of the body
- Being forced to watch sexual acts
- Being watched in a sexual way while clothed or unclothed
- Receiving intrusive written or spoken questions or comments in person or online

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment often involves patterns of behaviour that occur over time, but it can also be a single incident. The harasser can:

- Make sexual jokes
- Stare, yell or call at their target
- Make gestures or comments
- Give unwanted or inappropriately personal gifts
- Use demeaning language
- Ask for sex in exchange for something
- Make comments about a person's physical appearance
- Spread rumours
- Display bullying behaviour
- Stalk someone so they fear for their safety and the safety of anyone else they know because of threats or extortion

Who is most vulnerable to sexual abuse and sexual harassment?

While some incidents of sexual violence are reported, unfortunately, not all are. It can be due to fear and discrimination. There may not be readily available access to appropriate services that offer help. Often people who experience housing insecurity or homelessness are at a higher risk. But these

incidents also affect "women who are [Indigenous], disabled, or [immigrants or refugees], but men and boys are also often victims."⁵ Sexual abuse and harassment occur on college and university campuses and workplaces too.

- Indigenous women in Canada experience disproportionately high rates of sexual abuse compared to non-Indigenous women. First Nations women (18%); Métis women (26%); non-Indigenous women (11%).⁶
 - One study found that "eight out of ten girls under eight years of age were victims of sexual abuse, and five out of ten boys were also sexually abused," with the abuse being traced back to the "legacy of residential schools."⁷
- About 93% of children who are victims of sexual abuse know their abuser.⁸
 - One in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused before they turn 18.
 - The younger the victim, the more likely it is that the abuser is a family member, which could include an older sibling.
- "In 2020, one in four women (25%) and one in six men (17%) reported having personally experienced inappropriate sexualized behaviours in their workplace during the previous year."⁹
- People within the 2LGBTQI+ community experience high rates of sexual violence and report that incidents often occurred during childhood.
 - In one study, 42% said they had experienced colleagues making unwelcome comments or asking unwelcome questions about their sex life.¹⁰
 - More than a quarter (27%) reported receiving unwelcome verbal sexual advances.
 - Two-thirds (66%) said they did not report the harassment, with 25% of those saying it was because they were afraid of being "outed" at work.
- People who live with cognitive impairments/decline and people who live with disabilities are also at higher risk of sexual abuse or harassment.

Uncovering signs

Many people who have experienced sexual abuse or sexual harassment feel ashamed and are traumatized. Certain situations can cause them to revisit memories associated with their abuse or harassment and feel overwhelming terror or even a sense of guilt.¹¹ Often, the long-term effects of these experiences lead to problems with depression and anxiety. In some cases, people may choose suicide or avoid any intimacy or closeness. You could also notice things such as:

- Changes in personal hygiene practices
- Substance abuse
- Running away or avoidance of people/situations/places
- Compulsive eating
- Self-harm
- Difficulty swallowing
- Drastic mood swings
- Sudden appearance of gifts or expensive new possessions (clothing, technology, money)

Signs to be aware of in children¹²

- Feeling compelled to keep secrets
- Bruises, cuts
- Torn or stained underwear (signs of abuse or STDs)
- Frequent urinary or yeast infections (signs of abuse or STDs)
- Nightmares and anxiety around bedtime
- Bedwetting or soiling accidents unrelated to toilet training or past the appropriate age
- Preoccupation with their body
- Anger and tantrums
- Depressed and withdrawn mood
- Sexual knowledge or behaviours that are not age-appropriate
 - asking other children to play sexual games or mimicry with toys

Signs of potential abusers/harassers

- Grooming targets to gain trust (exceptionally caring and trying to get close)
- Being overly controlling, making decisions around when privacy is allowed or not
- Doesn't abide by boundaries (knocking on doors before entering bedrooms, bathrooms)
- Insists on affection, hugging, or touching without consent
- Steers conversations towards sexuality or body appearances using degrading language
- Tries to get uninterrupted time alone, one on one
- Seems to be obsessed with a particular person

- Insists on offering drugs or alcohol (to children, teens, or adults), especially when others are not around

Please note that these signs do not confirm that there is sexual abuse or sexual harassment. Especially in children, there can be other causes for the listed behaviours. However, these signs may help bring attention to what might possibly be sexual abuse or harassment.

What should you do if you or someone you know is being abused and/or harassed?

First and foremost, if something feels off, trust your instincts. Don't wait for proof. Keep a journal of behaviours that concern you. Unfortunately, statistics show a greater likelihood that your suspicions may be correct. You could start off having a conversation with someone you trust deeply and share your observations and concerns. That person may share your concerns or reject them. Remember that even if they disagree, it doesn't mean your concerns aren't valid. It could be that they are uncomfortable speaking about them or don't want to get involved.

Talk openly about consent, even with children. Everyone should have the right to refuse physical contact, even from relatives. Children should be allowed to choose which parent will help with bed/bath time. Similarly, avoid using substitute names for body parts. Children have the right to learn about their bodies with the correct anatomical words. This type of knowledge, reinforced with an understanding of consent, could become invaluable in abusive situations or where they could be harassed. Finally, if you cannot discuss a situation with someone around you, get advice from a helpline. These are staffed with experts who know the right resources available.

How to get help for those struggling

If you know someone is in immediate danger, call 9-1-1. You can also look online for national organizations that provide information, crisis support and helplines.

Some examples include:

- Sheltersafe.ca
- Kids Help Phone
- Cdn Human Trafficking Hotline
- Myplan Canada

There are also provincial and local resources to explore.

Healing from trauma

It's important to realize that these experiences can have lifelong impacts on survivors of sexual assault and sexual harassment, especially if those involved have not sought support. Long-term, these incidents can¹³:

- Affect educational outcomes
- Lead to heightened symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder
- Result in a higher suicide risk
- Manifest in self-harm and substance abuse
- Result in a higher likelihood of teen pregnancy and chronic health issues such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) or chronic pain

There is a higher chance of revictimization, where the person could be vulnerable to experiencing sexual abuse/harassment again in the future.

Help could come in various forms, but one of the most beneficial is therapy. With these types of events, treatment could involve taking medication to reduce anxiety and multiple forms therapy¹⁴:

- Trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy (TF-CBT)
- Family therapy
- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)
- Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT)
- Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing Therapy (EMDR)

Staying healthy and taking time for self-care are also important. Eating nutritious foods, exercising, getting enough sleep, avoiding the news and online activities (including social media), and journaling cannot be underestimated during the healing process. Finally, remember that people who have experienced sexual abuse or sexual harassment don't need to share their experiences with anyone if they aren't ready to.

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We want your questions, comments, and suggestions. Lifelines@homewoodhealth.com

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