Harassment: Let's Talk About It

By: Katherine Brown

Harassment - it's a word we've heard a lot lately. So, what exactly is harassment?

Anytime a person approaches you, engages you, or talks to you in a threatening or intimidating way - or just in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable - it is harassment.

Harassment can come in different forms - from that neighbor that pesters you about your dog every single day, to that coworker who routinely picks at everything you do.

For the last few years, sexual harassment has been one of the top concerns for society. Many women have come forward, sharing their personal stories of rape or inappropriate behavior from men (or other women).

In recent weeks, we've seen a rise in racial harassment - targeting people because of the color of their skin. In cell phone videos, people are shown aggressively approaching different individuals, making inappropriate comments about their race or what country they're from.

Harassment is not only bothersome, but at times, can be downright scary.

I know this because I myself have been harassed.

During my sophomore year of college, my dorm roommate harassed me. This young woman was repeatedly in my face. I always felt like I was being watched or monitored in the room. She often demanded (forced) me to do things I didn't want to do. I did whatever she wanted because I was genuinely scared of what would happen if I didn't. I do believe that she might've gotten violent if I didn't do what she wanted.

She yelled whenever she got angry. She threw temper tantrums over minor things. She yelled at me for talking on the phone with my family. She yelled at me for keeping a light on while I was sleeping alone one night. One time, she yelled simply because I didn't hear her say my name the first time.

She monitored my bathroom use, and became angry at me for washing my hands (the soap was mine). She watched me from the living room couch when I went to the bathroom to see what I was doing. As I was working on my laptop, I caught her standing behind me, just staring at me, waiting for me to turn around. It was like something out of a horror movie.

Everywhere I turned, she was there, with a complaint, demand, or otherwise distressing comment. I basically normalized her behavior in my head, when in fact, it wasn't normal.

To better understand my situation, think about it like this. Imagine if you had a neighbor who was repeatedly in your face every single day. When you walk out the door in the morning, she's standing on your sidewalk, demanding your grass be cut. When you return to your house with a travel mug in hand, she yells at you for "drinking too much coffee". When you're playing in the yard with your dog, you notice her sitting on her patio, watching everything you do. At night, she rings your doorbell, complaining that your porch light is shining too brightly.

That scenario would get pretty frightening, pretty fast. And that was how I felt - only my roommate lived in the same room as me.

My roommate's behavior was unnerving, but I didn't know how to speak up about it or tell her to stop. I didn't tell anyone about what was going on - I just suffered in silence. I didn't want to report her to the dorm staff - I thought it was "tattling". And, I didn't want it to seem like I was causing drama or making a fuss.

Unfortunately, many people don't report harassment at all, no matter the type. For example, one article notes that, "The majority of harassment cases in the workplace actually don't get reported and dealt with" (Miller, 2019, p.1). There is a myriad of reasons why a person might not report harassment. Common reasons for not reporting harassment include: the person thinks they won't be believed, a fear of retaliation, assuming there won't be confidentiality about the issue, or they wonder if what they experienced is considered harassment at all.

It was only recently that I got the courage to report my former roommate to my university's judicial affairs department. The issue was reported to both the Title IX and student conduct

administration offices. While I'm proud of myself for finally speaking up about it, I wish I would've done so when I lived with her. Even though I haven't lived with her for two years now, I'm still suffering from the effects of her behavior on me - including anxiety, distressing thoughts, and flashbacks. This isn't surprising - psychological issues are common among people who have experienced harassment. In fact, one article says, "People may suffer from anxiety or depressive issues. Some can even be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, and the effects may not show up for years" (Carpenter, 2018, p.1).

Reporting my roommate back then could have prevented this. The dorm staff could have removed me from the situation by switching my room. In this way, the harassment would have presumably stopped, because she would have had no real reason to interact with me anymore if I no longer lived with her.

This is why it's so important to report harassment - it helps fix the problem. I learned that no one can help you if you don't tell anyone or say anything - the harassment will only continue. We must encourage others to report their own personal stories of harassment. This helps the victims, and it brings awareness to the situation.

Harassment has no place in our communities, and we must take steps to stop it.

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