Trauma-Informed Response to Disclosures of Sexual Harassment

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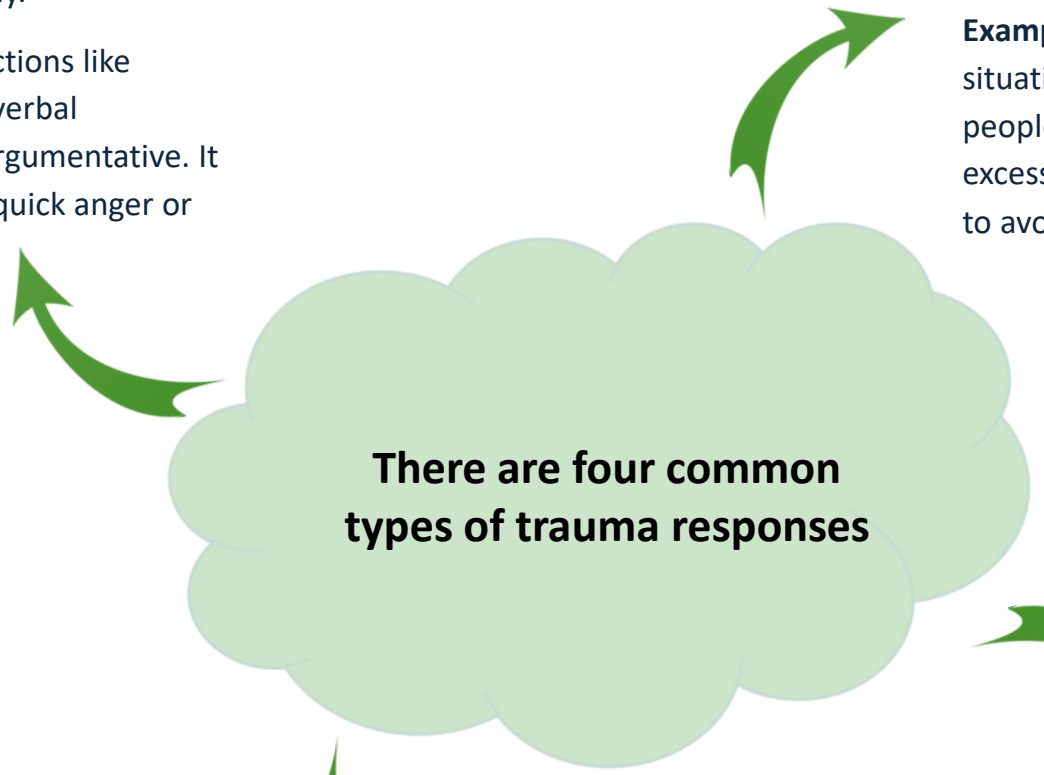
What is trauma?

It is how the body and mind react to a perceived threat, which is often linked to a past traumatic experience.

These responses are survival mechanisms controlled by the nervous system, designed to protect you in moments of danger.



Fight

This response involves confronting the threat aggressively.

Examples: physical actions like kicking or punching, verbal outbursts, or being argumentative. It can also manifest as quick anger or irritability

Flight

This involves escaping or avoiding the threat.

Examples: physically leaving a stressful situation, avoiding certain places or people, or engaging in activities like excessive exercise or substance abuse to avoid emotions.

Freeze

This response involves becoming immobile or “playing dead.”

Examples: feeling stuck or unable to move, dissociation, or binge eating as a way to cope with overwhelming emotions.

Fawn

This involves trying to please or appease the threat.

Examples: people-pleasing behaviours, over-apologising, or being overly accommodating to avoid conflict.

Trauma Triggers

Triggers

Following sexual harassment, an individual may start to experience triggers relating to the incident. Sometimes these triggers are directly after the incident, but often they appear at a later stage, sometimes months or years later.

Handling disclosures well is critical to ensure that the individual gets support promptly.

Triggers cause our brains to misinterpret present-day sensory cues, such as specific smells, tone of voice, or physical space or activity as if it were a life-threatening danger. These reactions are caused by the survival mechanism which is hardwired in our brains and often results in flashbacks, dissociation, or hyperarousal

Why late-stage triggers happen

Trauma changes how your brain processes and stores memories . When triggered, the emotional centre of the brain (the amygdala) overrides the logical centre (the prefrontal cortex), leaving your body feeling as though the harassment is happening all over again.

Common symptoms of triggers

- **Flashbacks:** Intensely vivid memories or feelings that make you feel like you are reliving the event.
- **Dissociation:** Feeling detached from your body, your emotions, or the physical world (e.g., feeling like you are watching yourself from a distance).
- **Hypervigilance:** Feeling constantly on edge, skittish, or experiencing physical symptoms like a racing heart, shallow breathing, or nausea.
- **Avoidance & Sleep Issues:** Unexplained urges to avoid certain environments or people, combined with insomnia or distressing nightmares.

The way you respond matters…

How you respond to a disclosure of sexual harassment is critical to ensuring that the individual feels safe and fully supported.

Whether the individual is reporting a recent incident or something in the past, you should remain consistent in following a trauma-informed approach.

It takes courage to report sexual harassment, therefore, responding with judgment and/or disbelief can silence and re-traumatise the individual.

A trauma-informed response empowers and validates an individual's experience, provides them with resources, and places control back into their hands. A controlling, gatekeeping, or minimising response may cause emotional harm.



Do: Empower

An empowering response allows the person disclosing sexual harassment to feel believed and that they are able to make the decision about what to do next, without it being forced on them.



Don’t: Control

A controlling response effectively takes the decision out of the individual’s hands and puts it in yours, to decide what happens next. The individual may not want this, nor be in an emotional position to decide what they want, or feel able to tell you, while they process what has happened to them



Don’t: Minimise

A minimising response seeks to reduces the impact of what the individual has experienced and essentially says that they can only receive support if they feel harmed and distressed. For example, saying things like “it wasn’t that bad”, or “you are just being sensitive”, or “it’s just a bit of flirting”.



Don’t: Gatekeep

A gatekeeping response is when you decide on whether the issue constitutes sexual harassment, and whether you will provide support or not. It invalidates the individual’s experience. It is only after a formal HR investigation that this decision would be made, so you should treat all disclosures seriously.

Practical steps

1. **Recognise** any of your own biases that could impact how you respond and correct them. *(Eg. "men can't be victims of sexual harassment"; "it was just banter"; "I know that person, they wouldn't do that"; "they were probably just flirting")*

2. **Validate** the individual's experience. Tell them you are sorry this has happened to them, that you are glad they came to you, and that you want to support them.

3. **Empower** them and remind them that they are valued, that this is not their fault, and they do not need to feel ashamed for what has happened to them. Let them know that they are in control of what happens now.

4. **Listen** to them and show empathy. At this stage you just need to be present with them while they disclose what has happened. Set aside any thoughts about the reporting process and just actively listen to them.

5. **Inform** them how to report this by talking them through the sexual harassment policy and support them with their decision, acting as their confidential supporter.

6. **Signpost** and support them to access appropriate resources to help them to deal with what has happened. This could be counselling, speaking to their doctor, contacting the police etc.

7. **Look after your own wellbeing**. Dealing with a disclosure can leave you feel a range of emotions. Speak to your line manager or access support with these feelings.

Supporting someone through a Trauma Trigger

When an individual discloses sexual harassment to you, they may start to have a panic attack because they are re-living the incident. When a victim is triggered, their brain struggles to distinguish past danger from current safety.

If this happens you should prioritise them feeling physically safe, communicate gently with them, and guide them through the ground techniques listed here.

Establish Immediate Safety and Control

- Ask before touching: Never hug, grab, or touch a triggered person without explicit permission. Touch can mimic the original boundary violation and worsen panic.
- Give physical space: Back up slightly so you do not look imposing. Ensure they have a clear path to the door so they do not feel trapped.
- Return their agency: Sexual harassment strips away a person's control. Give them small, simple choices to restore it, such as asking, "Would you like to sit down, or stand up?".
- Avoid asking for details: Do not ask them to explain what happened or describe the original harassment. Forcing them to talk about it will cause secondary trauma.

Supporting someone through a Trauma Trigger

Speak with Grounding Statements

Use a low, slow, and predictable voice to reassure their nervous system.

- "You are safe right now."
- "I am right here with you."
- "You are in a different place, and the danger has passed."
- "Take your time. There is no rush."

Guide Them Through Physical Grounding

When a trauma response hits, the mind becomes flooded with memory. Guide them to focus on physical sensations to disrupt the panic loop.

- **The 5-4-3-2-1 Sensory Method**: Ask them to look around and slowly name 5 things they can see, 4 things they can physically touch, 3 things they can hear, 2 things they can smell, and 1 thing they can taste.
- **Foot Stamping**: Have them firmly plant both feet on the floor. Ask them to stomp gently or wiggle their toes to remind them that they are physically anchored to the floor.
- **Exhale-Focused Breathing**: Do not just tell them to "breathe deeply," as shallow hyperventilation can worsen panic. Instead, ask them to copy you: breathe in through the nose for 4 seconds, and blow the air out slowly through the mouth for 6 seconds. Longer exhales trigger the body's natural relaxation response.