

SEXUAL SAFETY

BITESIZE LEARNING

What is Sexual Safety?

Sexual safety

An individual feels sexually safe when their physical, sexual and psychological boundaries are maintained and respected.

Sexual safety includes:

- **Safe environments** - cultures, policies, and practices that actively prevent sexual harm and respond appropriately when concerns are raised.
- **Support and accountability** - access to reporting pathways, trauma-informed responses, and consequences for harmful behaviour.
- **Consent** - clear, informed, freely given, and reversible agreement, without coercion, imbalance of power or impairment.
- **Boundaries** - limits and expectations that individuals set in order to protect their own physical, emotional and sexual wellbeing.
- **Freedom from harm** - protection from sexual harassment, assault, abuse, exploitation, and grooming.
- **Power awareness** - recognising how power imbalances (e.g. age, authority, professional roles, dependency, cultural beliefs and values) affect people's ability to consent.

Sexism, sexual harassment and sexual assault break safety mechanisms leading to negative consequences for the survivor including impacting their physical and mental health.

Boundaries

Boundaries are defined by each individual as to what feels safe, acceptable and respectful regarding their interactions with others.

They include, but are not limited to:

- **Physical**
personal space, touch and bodily autonomy
- **Emotional**
how much information we share, how others speak to us, how emotions are handled
- **Sexual**
what sexual contact, language and behaviour is acceptable
- **Time and energy**
limits around availability, workload and rest
- **Professional**
clear appropriate limits within roles

It is important to note that healthy boundaries are personal and can differ between individuals; they may change over time and in different contexts and do not require justification to be valid. When boundaries are expressed in any way (verbal, non-verbal) they must be respected. Power imbalances may make it harder for someone to speak up when the person going against their boundaries is in a more senior position.



Key definitions

Sexism →

Sexism is the prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination of an individual based on their sex. It can lead to unequal treatment, discrimination or harassment.

Sexual assault →

Sexual assault is any sexual act, contact, or behaviour that occurs without a person's free and informed consent, or where consent cannot be given or freely refused due to age, capacity, fear, coercion, manipulation, or power imbalance.

Sexual assault can include:

- Rape or sexual assault
- Unwanted sexual touching or contact
- Sexual acts involving children or young people
- Sexual exploitation or grooming
- Being pressured, threatened, or coerced into sexual activity
- Sexual activity with someone who cannot consent due to intoxication, disability, illness, or dependency
- Abuse of authority or trust for sexual purposes

Sexual harassment →

Sexual harassment is unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature.

To be sexual harassment, the unwanted behaviour must have either:

- Violated someone's dignity
- Created an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for someone

A behaviour can be sexual harassment if the behaviour:

- Has one of these effects even if it was not intended
- Intended to have one of these effects even if it did not have that effect



Examples of sexual harassment



Sending emails, texts or social media contact with sexual content – such as sending nude photos

Sexual gestures, leering, or staring



Sexualised comments or jokes



Unwanted sexual advances or flirting

Someone discussing their own sex life

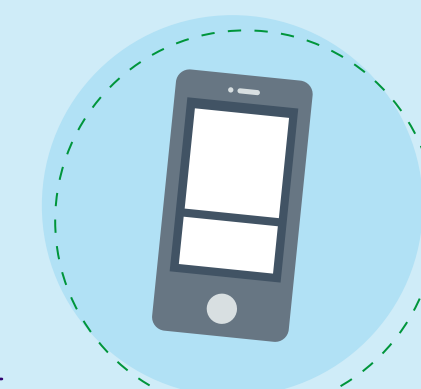


Stalking

Commenting on someone's body, appearance or what they're wearing



Spreading sexual rumours



Displaying images of a sexual nature

Comments of a sexual nature based on someone's gender or sexual identity



Intrusive questions about a person's private or sex life

What is Sexual Safety?



Important reminder

Sexism, sexual harassment or sexual assault can happen to people of any gender and any sexual orientation. It can be carried out by anyone of the same sex, another sex or anyone of any sexual orientation. Frequently these behaviours are perpetrated by someone senior towards a more junior victim.

Case study

Here is a short case study that you might find it helpful to read or talk with colleagues about as an example of sexual harassment: [→](#)

“I used to dread going into one placement. The senior nurse I was assigned to would make sexual jokes all the time, comments about my body and kept asking questions about my boyfriend. On the ward he would suddenly appear behind me and start rubbing my shoulders. The whole thing just didn't feel right. But he seemed to do it to everyone and it was just accepted”

Year 2 nursing student.



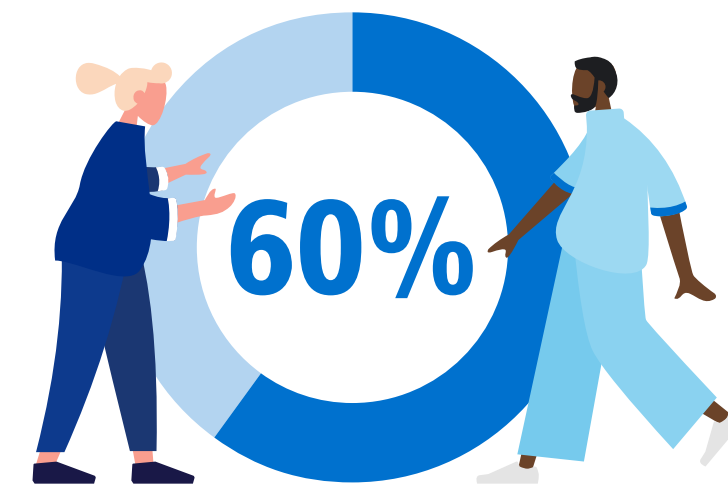
Surviving in Scrubs

Once London
Equity Initiatives



Key statistics

Joint Nursing Times and UNISON survey [→](#)

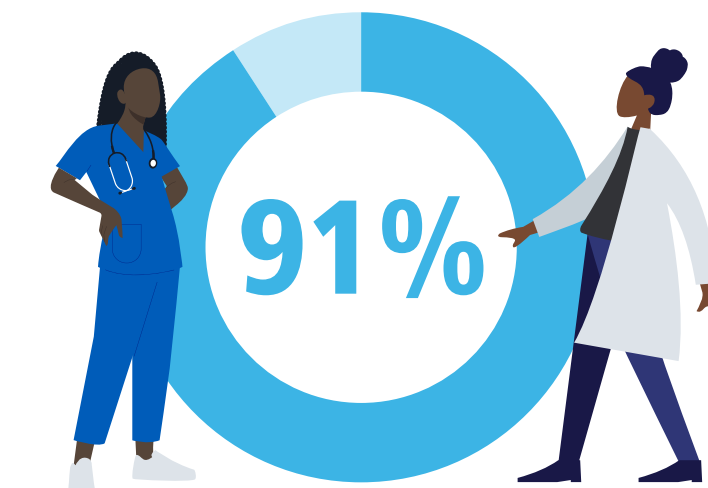


of nurses have experienced sexual harassment at work

UNISON survey [→](#)

8% allied HCPs had been sexually harassed in the last year

BMA Sexism in Medicine Survey [→](#)



female doctors experienced sexism

56% of women

28% of men

respondents received unwanted verbal conduct

31% of women

23% of men

respondents experienced unwanted physical conduct

What can I do?

Reflect on the questions below to help you become more aware of your own sexual safety and that within your workplace:

- ? **Do you think sexual safety is an issue in your workplace?**
Think about the conversations, messages and group chats you have with your own colleagues.
- ? **What factors can drive sexual safety problems in healthcare?**
Think about when you or someone else may be particularly vulnerable - lone working, one-on-one working, working out of hours, workplace social events, power imbalances, culture etc.

Find out more

Look at some key resources, policy and legislation if you want to find out more:

- 1. Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023:** Legal duty for employers to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace
- 2. Sexual safety in healthcare charter:** A framework introduced by NHS England that applies to everyone who works, trains or learns in NHS settings and commits organisations to ten core principles and actions aimed at preventing and responding appropriately to sexual harassment, misconduct and abuse
- 3. Supporting colleagues affected by sexual misconduct:** A dedicated support page from NHSE [→](#)
- 4. Support for Individuals:** A dedicated support page from Surviving in Scrubs [→](#)