

Catalysts for dialogue

Legal expert Aner Voloder is a project manager at the Gender Equality Office of the City of Zurich. He is also on the advisory team of 'belaestigt.ch', an organisation fighting workplace harassment. He has agreed to comment on the catch phrases for Sexual Harassment Awareness Day, the national day against sexual harassment in the university context. (Source: <https://universities-against-harassment.ch/en/ressourcen/discussion-cookies>)

Can I hang nude art in the office?

Material with sexual connotations does not belong in the workplace unless it is directly related to the activity being performed. For example, nude art would be unproblematic in a gallery or in an art academy. However, even in this context, the necessity of its display in an office setting is open to question.

Can I ask my fellow students or work colleagues about their relationship status?

Relationship status is considered part of a person's private sphere. Depending on the context and your relationship with your colleague, such a question can certainly seem invasive. If in doubt, it is advisable to wait until they mention something about their relationship status themselves, for example during a shared coffee break.

Can I ask my fellow students or work colleagues about their sexual orientation?

Frontal questions regarding sexual orientation can be perceived as intrusive and as an infringement of personal privacy. It depends very much on the context and on your relationship with your colleague. It is advisable to wait until the person reveals something about it, e.g. when talking about private life in a casual setting or if the person mentions their holidays with their partner during the coffee break.

Are jokes related to sexuality ever unproblematic?

In general, sexual or sexist language, jokes or similar behaviours do not belong in the workplace. Supervisors are expected to act as role models. It is their responsibility to establish boundaries on what can be discussed, and how, in the workplace. Jokes, comments or stories with a sexual undertone are often a demonstration of power.

I felt uncomfortable but didn't realise until months later that I had been sexually harassed. Is that possible?

It certainly is. And it is perfectly legitimate to not realise or acknowledge it until later. Boundary violations and violations of personal integrity require time to process. Seek appropriate counselling and get support from organisations such as 'belästigt.ch.'

Is it appropriate to hug fellow students or colleagues on their birthdays?

Here, too, it depends on the relationship between the persons involved. Do they tend to display warmth and physical contact?

The person's subjective feeling is always decisive. Everybody has personal boundaries and other people must respect them. For some, a hug might feel like a line has been crossed.

Are romantic relationships between supervisors and their subordinates problematic or not?

They are problematic, because private and professional interests can get in the way. Conflicts of interest and loyalty can often arise due to the hierarchical relationship (superior function, authority to issue directives, duty to assess performance, etc.). This can lead to tensions within the team or to abuse of power.

Fighting back when harassed is only possible in Hollywood movies.

When a boundary is crossed or a person is harassed, they may initially experience a state of shock. It is not always possible or even reasonable to expect a quick response from them, especially in cases where there is a hierarchical relationship with the perpetrator. This is why it is so important to make managers and employees aware of these issues. A special training course can teach them the skills to support others and confidently intervene rather than turning a blind eye.

In my opinion, supervisors and employees should not go out for a beer together.

In principle, going out for a drink is not problematic, unless it is for motives other than professional or purely cordial. In hierarchical relationships, there is always the potential risk of a conflict of interest. Accordingly, the nature of the relationship must always be kept in mind.

Why is it easier for me to ask for help and support for another person than for myself?

In situations where boundaries have been crossed, the people affected often feel that they have no control over what is acceptable or not. Due to feelings of powerlessness, helplessness or shame, they often downplay or minimise the harassment they have experienced. Civil courage is vital. It shows those affected that they are being wronged and that their treatment is unacceptable.

What is more difficult to deal with, lewd looks or lewd remarks?

There is no one-size-fits-all answer to this question. The difficulty with lewd looks is that they are often not immediately recognisable as such. And they can easily lead to other things. It is important that individuals experiencing undesirable behaviour take their feelings seriously and understand that they have the legal right to a workplace free from harassment. It is also important that they discuss their concerns with appropriately trained persons.

If I watch porn silently on my mobile phone during my break and no one can see my screen, that's okay.

Pornographic material in the workplace is generally prohibited under the Gender Equality Act, whether or not another person is watching with you or witnessing the situation.

Do people we find attractive want to know our opinion?

It is difficult to give a general answer to this question. The decisive factor is the subjective perception of the recipient of such a statement and whether they take it as a compliment or not. The relationship between the persons involved also plays a role. If the recipient signals that such compliments are undesirable (e.g. through their facial expression), you should obviously stop immediately.

X. is pansexual/asexual/... I have many questions about this. Can I ask them to X.?

Asking direct questions about sexuality, sexual orientation or gender identity may be perceived as transgressive or violate a person's privacy, especially if they have not disclosed this information themselves. However, if they have already talked about it and you wish to inquire further, it is advisable to request permission to ask a few more questions. If the person refuses, this should be accepted without reservation.

In my view, witnesses of sexual harassment who do nothing to address it are complicit.

This sweeping statement is problematic, particularly when one considers the hierarchical relationships and power dynamics that are prevalent in the workplace. In terms of reporting, countering and intervening, witnesses often share the same concerns as those directly affected: fear of losing their job (retaliatory dismissal), exclusion, recrimination and other forms of negative consequences. Witness interventions are always welcome. They are a valuable tool for combatting a toxic, sexualised, homophobic and transphobic corporate culture and for dismantling structural sexism at work, which remains a pervasive issue.