



Australian
Human Rights
Commission

Full Stop **Australia**

Support and self-care guide

Trauma-informed guidance to accompany the release of *Set the Standard: Report on the Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces*

November 2021

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Definitions

Bullying: Bullying is repeated and unreasonable behaviour that is directed towards a worker or a group of workers and creates a risk to physical or mental health and safety.

Sexual harassment: Sexual harassment is an unwelcome sexual advance, unwelcome request for sexual favours or other unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature which, in the circumstances, a reasonable person, aware of those circumstances, would anticipate the possibility that the person would feel offended, humiliated, or intimidated.

Sexual assault: Sexual assault is commonly understood as an act of a sexual nature carried out against a person's will through the use of physical force, intimidation or coercion, including any attempts to do this. This includes rape, attempted rape, aggravated sexual assault (assault with a weapon), indecent assault, penetration by objects, forced sexual activity that did not end in penetration and attempts to force a person into sexual activity. Incidents so defined would be an offence under state and territory criminal law. Note: Sexual assault occurs when a person is forced, coerced or tricked into sexual acts against their will or without their consent, including when they have withdrawn their consent.

1 Purpose of this Resource

This Resource is designed to accompany *Set the Standard: Report on the Independent Review into Independent Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces* to support individuals and managers through the release of the Report.

The Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces (Review) was established by the Australian Government with support from the Opposition and crossbench. It was conducted by the Australian Human Rights Commission.

Through the Review, the Commission was tasked with building an understanding of the culture of Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces (CPWs), with the aim of ensuring a safe and respectful work environment, with our national Parliament reflecting best practice in the prevention of and responses to bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault.

As part of the Review, the Commission invited people who currently work, or have previously worked, in CPWs to share their experiences, including those relating

to bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault.

The Review's Report is available at <https://humanrights.gov.au/set-standard-2021>. The Report sets out:

- the context of CPWs and case for change, including the existing policy and legislative frameworks for addressing workplace bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault
- the specific drivers and risk factors for bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault in CPWs, drawing on what the Commission heard during the Review
- a proposed Framework for Action and recommendations to create safe and respectful work environments in CPWs in five areas (leadership; diversity, equality, and inclusion; systems to support performance; standards, reporting and accountability; and safety and wellbeing).

The Commission understands that the release of the Report may surface a range of responses for people.

For people who have experienced bullying, sexual harassment or sexual assault, or supported someone who has experienced these behaviours, the release of the Report may be particularly difficult. There is also a possibility that the release of the Report may result in increased disclosures of bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault, including to supervisors and managers.

2 Who is this Resource for?

This Resource is designed to support anyone who might be affected by the release of the Report. This includes:

- people who have engaged in the Review process
- people who currently work, or have previously worked, in CPWs who may have experienced bullying, sexual harassment and/or sexual assault
- bystanders or witnesses to bullying, sexual harassment, and sexual assault in CPWs
- staff and supervisors in CPWs who may have past or current experiences of interpersonal trauma
- supervisors and managers working with staff and teams in

CPWs who may experience secondary/vicarious trauma and distress.

3 Trauma and its impacts

The Commission acknowledges that the release of the Report, and anticipated public attention, may trigger a range of responses by potentially re-activating memories and experiences of bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault. Some of these impacts may include, but are not limited to, re-traumatisation. Whilst this kind of response is normal, not all survivors are the same, nor will they process or respond in the same way.

It is important to understand that experiencing recalling bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault can commonly result in trauma. Trauma occurs when our ability to cope is overwhelmed. Trauma can have a significant effect on your physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing. The impacts of trauma may surface at any time, particularly when survivors tell or repeat their experiences, or when they encounter similar experiences are shared by others.

Trauma looks different for people depending on their experience of trauma and other factors such as exposure to previous traumatic events, access to support and mental health status.

Some of the more common impacts include:

- panic and anxiety
- fear about the world being dangerous and unsafe
- nightmares, insomnia and mood swings
- hyper vigilance and heightened stress responses
- difficulty concentrating
- emotional numbness
- depression and low mood
- intrusive thoughts and memories
- avoidance of certain people and situations.

In the context of work, the impacts of trauma may not always be apparent, but some of things you might notice for yourself or other people could include:

- fear or worry related to being identified
- relief that the Report has been released, possibly creating a sense of closure
- distress caused by recalling the event/s or other processes that may be to come including

ongoing investigation, workplace processes, reporting or criminal proceedings

- disengagement in work due to the impacts of trauma
- frustration at the pace of change.

NOTE: Please be aware you or others may observe changes in colleagues but depending on the levels of change and the impacts observed, it is **never appropriate** to seek out a disclosure from staff members or colleagues.

4 What if I am experiencing distress?

If you have experienced bullying, sexual harassment or sexual assault, the release of the Report may be difficult.

There are a range of supports available and it is important that you ensure you are engaging with activities the prioritise your wellbeing. These can include:

- building and drawing on a good support network of friends, family and professional support

- making time to spend with friends and family
- regular exercise
- practicing good sleep hygiene
- doing a social media detox, or limiting engagement with media
- exploring activities such as mindfulness, meditation or yoga.

Remember, you are the expert in your own needs and your own wellbeing. It is important to have a range of self-care and safety strategies in place that you know you can rely on.

5 Information for managers and supervisors

5.1 Understanding your role as a manager or supervisor

In preparation for the release of the Report there are a number of things you can do to respond to staff who may be affected and the impact it might have. These include but are not limited to:

- ✓ Put it on the agenda at your staff meeting with the following messages:
 - Note some people might be affected directly and indirectly
 - Highlight the relevant policies and places where staff can seek further information about reporting and disclosures
 - Respect privacy of others and don't share their stories without their permission
 - If you are sharing your own story, please be mindful about the impact it has on others.
 - If you are worried about someone in the team, it is not your role to be their counsellor, please direct them to support services
 - Remind people there is support available
 - Acknowledge that this is a positive step forward for CPWs and organisations everywhere and contributions to the Review of people affected by bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault.

- ✓ Make information about support services available in common areas and electronically.
- ✓ Have relevant policies and protocols accessible for yourself and the rest of the team.
- ✓ Identify that you are a contact point for information and referral information but there are limitations in the support you can provide, that is, you are not a counsellor.

5.2 What is disclosure?

The concept of a disclosure for most of us is a clear story or recollection of information related to a traumatic event. In reality, disclosures are most

often not linear, that is, timelines and recollections don't always make sense. This can make some disclosures not seem plausible, but it is very important to understand that the lack of clarity can be caused by fear and anxiety in the moment. Trauma affects the brain and how memories get stored and recalled.

5.3 Responding to disclosure

The key principles in responding to a disclosure, examples of how disclosure might manifest in the workplace, and suggested trauma informed responses, are outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Key principles in responding to disclosure

Principles	Examples of how a disclosure might present in the workplace and how you might respond
<p>1. Demonstrate empathy and accept disclosure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Where possible, speak one-on-one with the person making the disclosure. - Let them know that you believe them and they are not to blame. - Acknowledge and give permission for their emotional responses and let them know that is alright to be upset. - Try to avoid repeated questioning on aspects of their disclosure. 	<p><i>"Yes, I gave information as part of that Review" or "Yes, something like that happened to me". There might be no further detail provided.</i></p> <p>Action: Supervisor to follow up with the person: <i>"I noticed you mentioned earlier about the Review/Report, I hope you are ok, is there anything that needs to be followed up from our end? I also wanted to remind you that there are supports available."</i></p> <p><i>"That happened to my friend. It was awful and they are really finding life difficult at the moment. I just don't know what to do for them."</i></p>

<p>2. Re-establish safety – both psychological and physical</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Acknowledge the distress that the person may be experiencing. - Ask the person what they need to feel safe at this point. Some things to consider include going to see a counsellor, talking to a trusted friend, or going for a walk. - Ask the person if they are safe. Something to consider is the currency of the issue being discussed. In particular, is the abuse still happening? Is the person/s harming them in the workplace? Do they know where they live or any other threats? - If the matter is current and/or related to a criminal offence, a supervisor should seek advice about safety and reporting requirements for the person making the disclosure and from an organisational perspective. <p>3. Demonstrate respect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Acknowledge the trust it took to make the disclosure. You could say: <i>"Thank you for being willing to share that with me."</i> - Explain that you are not a counsellor, you are able to listen, but you will need to refer them on. - Ask the person what they want to happen. - Be clear and transparent about your role, reporting requirements and any requests that can't be met. 	<p>Action: Supervisor to acknowledge the statement by saying something like: <i>"Sorry to hear that. Here is some information for your friend, but also remember there is support available for you too. While it might not have happened to you directly, hearing stories like that and seeing people we care about distressed can be hard. Make sure you take care of yourself too. You sound like you are doing a great job!"</i></p> <p>Direct and formal disclosure where a staff member sets aside time with a supervisor to discuss a current or past issue. They may be seeking advice about what to do next or seeking formal action in response to their disclosure.</p> <p>Action: Please refer to principles for responding to a disclosure.</p> <p>Clear disclosure that occurs in a group / team / public setting where the person is highly distressed.</p> <p>Action: Acknowledge the person's distress and disclosure in that setting. Supervisors should then work to engage with the person directly. <i>"It sounds like you are very upset and thank you for sharing your experience'.</i></p> <p>Action: Supervisors should also follow up with the people who witnessed the disclosure and offer to refer them for support. It is essential that supervisors maintain clear boundaries around privacy by stating: <i>"I know the information that Sue talked about this morning might have been upsetting. I have met with Sue and put her in contact with supports. There are also options available for you if you feel you need to talk about what happened. Also, it is important that while Sue shared her story publicly, that you respect her privacy and not discuss this situation with others, this will be very important."</i></p>
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Table 2: Responding to disclosures

Things to Do	Things to Avoid
Respond with empathy and give time for the person to share their story	Shut the person down or not acknowledge that you have heard their story
Acknowledge the person’s courage in coming forward	Telling a person that you understand what they are going through or have a similar story about yourself or another person in an effort to “make them feel more comfortable”.
Be clear and transparent about your role as a supervisor, including how you intend to manage the information they have shared, reporting responsibilities, privacy and what you can and cannot do.	Ask intrusive questions or seek further details beyond what they are willing to disclose or is needed to establish safety and follow up.
Give the person agency in what happens next and establish an agreed upon plan and follow through on this.	Force the person to re-engage with the topic when they have told you they would like to manage this themselves.
Seek appropriate support and advice related to the disclosure. In doing this, maintaining the confidentiality of the individual is paramount by not using their name or other identifying information.	Talk to colleagues about the disclosure other than what is formally required for reporting purposes.
Ensure that you seek professional support to debrief and identify self-care strategies in relation to the disclosure.	Talk to family members, colleagues or friends instead of seeking professional support.

5.4 Follow up after a disclosure

The kind of follow up offered following a disclosure will be dependent on the nature of the issue being raised. As a colleague or a supervisor, please check that the person is currently safe and understands the options they have for keeping themselves safe.

Where there is no immediate risk identified, it is always best to ask the person who made the disclosure what they want to happen next. You could give them a few options such as:

- *“Could I call or text you in a few days just to see how you are feeling?”*
- *“Should I leave it to you to come and let me know how things are going?”*
- *“I know you are worried about your privacy. Can I send you an email in a few days asking you how you are progressing on the ‘project’?”*

5.5 What if I am affected by the disclosure?

Given the prevalence of bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault it would not be uncommon for supervisors to have their own

experience or care for someone that has or is currently experiencing these types of misconduct.

Hearing and responding to disclosures of assault and harassment can be challenging. This may be particularly relevant if you have had personal experience or if friends and family have had experiences. In the workplace you have a duty to respond to your staff and colleagues in a professional way and it is not appropriate to share your story, particularly in the context of another person’s disclosure.

It is important to know yourself, how you respond to stress and anxiety and be alert to the signs of secondary traumatic stress and vicarious trauma. This can occur when you are exposed to or hear traumatic material, even if it did not happen to you directly it can still have an impact.

If you are experiencing distress, consider the suggestions and activities outlined in section 4 above.

6 What if I am concerned about someone's safety and wellbeing?

Some of the indicators that a person is at ongoing risk of harm or exposure to misconduct include:

- the person harming them is still present at their home and/or workplace.
- they have told you they feel unsafe and don't know what to do or who to talk to.
- you observe the person harming them continuing the behaviour in the workplace. In some situations, they may receive constant phone calls, text messages or emails and/or the person may turn up at the workplace to check on them.
- you observe physical signs of bullying, sexual harassment, or sexual assault.
- you observe signs that the person is mentally unwell and/or they make comments about not coping and having a sense of hopelessness and/or explicitly say that they want to harm or kill themselves.

7 Services and referrals

The kind of referral and follow up offered following a disclosure will be dependent on the nature and currency of this issue being raised.

As a supervisor, you need to ensure that the person is currently safe and is informed of the available reporting and referral options. It is essential that you recognise the agency and choice of the individual to determine how they may want to proceed, and you do not pressure them based on what you think they should do.

Parliamentary Workplace Support Service

The Parliamentary Workplace Support Service (PWSS) is an independent and confidential support and complaint service for current or former *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984* (Cth) staff and parliamentarians who have been affected by a serious incident during parliamentary employment.

Website: <https://pwss.gov.au/>

Ph: 1800 747 977

Commonwealth Parliamentary Support Line

The Commonwealth Government

has established an independent and confidential 24/7 telephone service to support all current and former Commonwealth ministerial, parliamentary and electorate office staff. The Parliamentary Support Line provides access to confidential trauma-informed counselling services for people who have experienced a serious incident in a Commonwealth parliamentary workplace. As well as counselling, the support line can provide supported referrals to other specialist services, and assistance in determining pathways to progress complaints.

Website:

<https://maps.finance.gov.au/safe-and-respectful-workplace-culture/responding-and-support/parliamentary-support-line-1800-aph-spt>

Ph: 1800 274 778

Sexual harassment and sexual assault

1800RESPECT

A national sexual assault, domestic and family violence counselling and information referral service (available 24-hours a day, 7 days a week).

Website:

<https://www.1800respect.org.au/>

Ph: 1800 737 732

Full Stop Australia

Full Stop Australia provides counselling for people whose lives have been impacted by violence and abuse. Available 24-hours a day.

Website: <https://fullstop.org.au/>

Ph: 1800 385 578

For information on other national and state and territory support services, including sexual assault and crisis services please visit the list of services available on the Commission website:

<https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/list-support-services>

Bravehearts

Provides specialist child sexual assault and exploitation counselling and support services.

Website: www.bravehearts.org.au

Ph: 1800 272 831

Mental health

Beyond Blue

A national, independent, not-for-profit that provides information about depression and/or anxiety and referrals to mental health support services (available 24-hours a day, 7 days a week).

Website:

<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/>

Ph: 1300 22 4636

Lifeline

A national service that offers a 24/7 crisis support telephone service (available 24-hours a day, 7 days a week).

Website: <https://www.lifeline.org.au/>

Ph: 131 114

Workplace rights and advice

Fair Work Commission

The Fair Work Commission is Australia's national workplace relations tribunal. Its role is to assist employees and employers to maintain fair and productive workplaces. The Commission is an independent body that operates under the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth).

Website:

<https://www.fwc.gov.au/disputes-at-work/anti-bullying/where-to-get-help-about-bullying>

Ph: 1300 799 675

Safe Work Australia

Safe Work Australia is an Australian government statutory agency. Safe Work Australia develops national policy to improve work health and safety (WHS) and workers' compensation arrangements across Australia.

Website:

www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/bullying

Ph: 1300 366 979

Comcare

Comcare is the national authority for work health and safety, and workers' compensation.

Website:

<https://www.comcare.gov.au/>

Ph: 1300 366 979

Australian Human Rights Commission – complaints

The Australian Human Rights Commission is an independent statutory body which can investigate complaints about discrimination and human rights breaches.

Website:

<https://humanrights.gov.au/complaints>

Ph: 1300 656 419