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HOW TO SUPPORT A LOVED ONE FACING ONLINE HARASSMENT ?

LAST UPDATED JULY 2025

AUTHOR'S NOTE

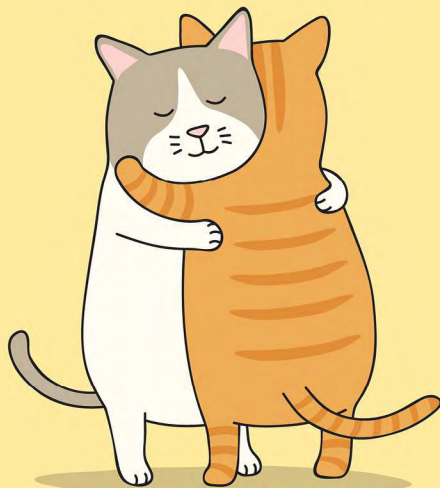
Supporting a friend that is facing online harassment needs sensitivity and care. It is important to assess your capacity and make a plan on how you can support.

This resource is intended to provide information to navigate and help you make decisions. It is intended for anyone who wants to support a loved one beyond emotional support.

Our experience has taught us that this can be a hard fight and sometimes leading to no resolution. We recommend you to reach out to people you trust and organisations which can help for support.

You are not alone and there are people who care about you, including us.

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01 PREPARATION

CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF AND UNDERSTAND YOUR CAPACITY

Before you start take a moment to acknowledge your own strength and hold onto a gentle pride in your heart for stepping up in this way.

Your bravery in standing by someone in distress during their time of need is truly commendable. However, it's important to recognise that this experience might leave you feeling distressed, overwhelmed, or affected by the situation as well.

During such times, consider these supportive actions to safeguard your mental health and well-being. Remember, these are merely suggestions; if you are dealing with existing mental health issues, **please reach out to your healthcare provider** to discuss your situation openly.

Before you extend support, please reflect on this:

Remember to breathe. Our breath serves as a powerful regulator of our nervous system. As you lend your shoulder to support another, take a deep breath to experience how it feels to embrace this role.

Once you feel more in tune with your breath, calmly and without judgement, check-in with your body.

Ask yourself how the experience of extending support resonates within your body, system & current life circumstances.

You could use these questions to reflect:

- Am I resourced/equipped to deal with this situation?
- Is playing the role of a supporter empowering me or distressing me at this time?
- Do I currently have the strength and ability to extend support to this person?

And remember, there is no right or wrong answer here! Sit comfortably, intentionally take a few deep breaths and ask yourself these questions as if you were asking a friend and without overthinking; be perceptive to the responses your body instinctively offers, without analysis.

At times, that answer may be a resounding **No!**
It could be: ***'this is way too distressing for me!
This is not for me; I don't feel good extending my support to them at the moment'***.

While it may feel 'wrong' to withdraw support during such times, consider that your body and mind possess profound wisdom regarding what is right for you.

In moments like these, the most courageous choice is to step back and seek alternative support for that person, instead of compromising your own intuition.

In the heat of the moment, it may seem that you are no longer being supportive, but stepping back is, in fact, sometimes the most courageous and nurturing action you can take for both yourself and the individual navigating the distressing experience. Sometimes, the best support you can offer is to step back from the situation altogether.

Sometimes the answer might be a clear ***'yes, I can do this,'*** while other times it may come across as ***'Yes, I can do this, but I could use some support too.'***

As mentioned before, your body knows best.

So, take a moment to tune into it and move forward accordingly.

SECURING YOUR INFORMATION AND ACCOUNTS

Before you begin supporting someone else. It's important to secure yourself.

- Please change your passwords on personal social media, communication and financial accounts to a stronger password.

Here is an example of how to create a stronger password -

<https://youtu.be/aEmF3lylvr4>

This will prevent further access to your accounts or information to your abuser in case they have any access to these.

- If you have lost access to your account we recommend that you try recovery and if that fails please check the section below on reaching for additional support
- Add more recovery options to your account (such as keys and secure recovery emails) and remove any potential recovery options that may be controlled by someone else
- Add login notifications to your account to know if someone else has logged in.
- Add a two factor authentication (we suggest usage of passkeys or atleast authentication apps) to your account

SCRUB YOUR INFORMATION ONLINE

Depending on the nature of the harasser it is possible that you could be a target of harassment while supporting someone else facing harassment. We suggest taking the following measures to protect yourself. (We have put them in the order of priority. Please do as much as possible for you)

- Review your social media accounts regularly to see what personal data (this could include your contact details, date of birth, information about loved ones or your work) is exposed based on your privacy and security settings on a regular basis.
- Do a search on all possible search engines in incognito mode
- Do all this for your loved ones too
- Make notes of all information that you want to remove.
- Set up google alerts for your personal information (eg: search for your “name”, “organisation” or “address”)
- Sign up (if possible) with services which can find information for you eg (spokeo, deleteme digital footprint scan)
- Do a reverse image search of yourself using TinEye, Google image search and Yandex.

REMOVING DATA ONLINE

- Remove any data that you have identified on social media account through profile settings. You can also use services like DeleteMe. DeleteMe is a platform that can help remove content from search engines.

<https://www.deleteme.com/search-engine-removal/>

- Google Search supports removal of images here

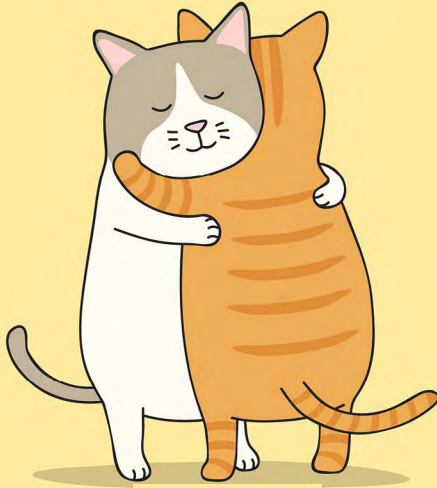
<https://support.google.com/websearch/answer/6302812>

- Here is a video to show on how to remove old content from Google

<https://youtu.be/4nZcCDfYDfE>

- Inform and educate your loved ones on posting personal information online.

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02 EDUCATION

UNDERSTANDING COMMON TACTICS OF HARASSMENT

Fighting online harassment requires an understanding of tactics of harassment. Online harassment is aimed at harming the person whom it is directed at and sometimes people around them.

Online harassment is often complex and hard to understand. What might seem like a single instance could be a coordinated attack. The fight against harassment is effective when we understand the nature and intent.

UNDERSTANDING COMMON TACTICS OF HARASSMENT

Gender-based Slurs and Harassment

This kind of harassment, involves the use of words, insults, profanity and, often, images to communicate hostility towards women and non binary and transgender people.. Typically, harassers resort to words such as “bitch,” “slut,” “whore,” “fag” or “cunt” and include commentary on physical appearances. [Derived from : WMC]

Cross platform harassment

When a harasser, or group of harassers, deliberately sabotages or invades multiple online spaces for the purposes of harassing a target. Cross-platform harassment is very effective because users are currently unable to report this scope and context of the harassment when they contact platforms, each of which will only consider the harassment happening on their own sites.[Source: WMC]

Sexual Objectification

Harassers frequently objectify their targets, including through the use of manipulated photographs and sexually explicit descriptions of their bodies. Photographs are often used without their consent and manipulated so that they appear in pornographic scenes or used in memes. [Derived from : WMC]

UNDERSTANDING COMMON TACTICS OF HARASSMENT

Threats

Rape and death threats frequently coincide with sexist, racist commentary. While online threats may not pass current legal tests for what constitutes a “true threat,” they do generate anxiety and alter the course of a person’s life. [Derived from : WMC]

Doxxing

The publishing of sensitive personal information online—including home address, email, phone number, social security number, photos, etc.—to harass, intimidate, extort, stalk, or steal the identity of a target. [Derived from: Pen America Website]

Defamation

Coordinated attempts at defamation take place when a person, or, sometimes, organized groups deliberately flood social media and review sites with negative and defamatory information.[Derived from : WMC]

Flaming

A flood of vitriolic and hostile messages including threats, insults, slurs and profanity. [Derived from : WMC]

UNDERSTANDING COMMON TACTICS OF HARASSMENT

Deadnaming

A form of harassment in which a person's former name is revealed against their wishes for the purposes of harm. [Derived from : WMC]

Cyber-Mob Attacks (aka Dogpiling)

When a large group of abusers collectively attacks a target through a barrage of threats, slurs, insults, and other abusive tactics. [Derived from : Pen America Website]

TALKING WITH SOMEONE WHO IS FACING HARASSMENT

Before you engage with someone who is experiencing harassment, it's crucial to ensure that you are grounded and centered within yourself. Your well-being is just as important as the support you offer to them.

Start by finding a safe, private, and comfortable space where you can converse freely, without feeling the need to look over your shoulder. You might want to check-in and articulate that to each other.

Take the time to identify a setting that feels right, whether your meeting is in person or online. Once you're settled, take a moment to connect on a human level. Remember, while they may be the one facing harassment, and you are there to support them, it's essential to establish a fundamental connection rooted in empathy and understanding between the two of you.

Aim for mutual respect, a genuine curiosity about each other's feelings, and an expression of integrity and strength throughout your interaction.

It is crucial for someone who has experienced harassment to feel safe. Understand that it's completely normal for them to need time before they can trust, confide, or share their story with you. Allow them the space to express themselves at their own pace.

Please refrain from pressuring them for details or information. Instead, focus on creating an environment where you can engage in active and compassionate listening. The act of truly listening and feeling heard can be profoundly therapeutic, offering a tremendous opportunity for both of you to connect and support each other.

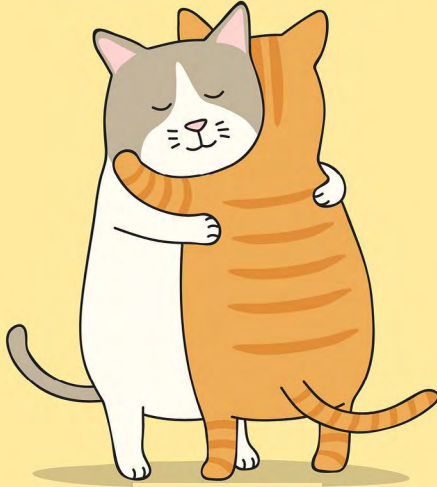
Walking together while engaging in conversation, allowing for moments of silence if they feel inclined, and being genuinely present and attentive in their company are thoughtful considerations to keep in mind.

Listen with an open heart: approach with understanding and believe in them. While questions such as, “Are you sure that’s how it happened?” may seem significant and necessary, it’s helpful to find a gentle and considerate way to verify facts, rather than asking directly if they were ‘really harassed.’

It’s essential for someone who has faced harassment to feel cherished and understood; their experiences are important, and offering them a safe space to share their feelings is a crucial step in alleviating their distress. Validate their emotions and their journey.

Reassure them that it’s not their fault and that it’s entirely normal to have a range of feelings. Avoid giving unsolicited advice; instead cultivate spaces where you listen without judgement.

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03 DIVING INTO SUPPORT

SECURING YOUR INFORMATION AND ACCOUNTS

This is an important step for anyone facing harassment. But often those facing harassment are unable to do this.

- Please change your passwords on personal social media, communication and financial accounts to a stronger password. Here is an example of how to create a stronger password -

<https://youtu.be/aEmF3lylvr4>

This will prevent further access to your accounts or information to your abuser in case they have any access to these.

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DIRECT SUPPORT

This involves directly interacting with harassment and harassers. Supporting your loved ones while dealing with harassment could strengthen their fight. This kind of direct involvement would be helpful in certain situations*.

- **Debunking:** Debunking any disinformation that the harassers share would help neutralize any reputational harms that they intend to cause. The debunking can be done through sharing citations. They can be presented in various formats including humor.
- **Blocking and Reporting:** When done by multiple people this has proved to be an effective strategy in fight against harassment. Especially where harassment is not evident as clear violation of community standards eg. abuse in a slang that has hidden context or a underrepresented language.
- **Amplifying:** This has seen to be effective when some is facing dogpiling or flaming. This can help build collective support against the harassers in a short period of time

Before engaging with the harassers it is good to do an assessment of the harassment. Here is a resource to help you do the assessment

<https://onlineharassmentfieldmanual.pen.org/assessing-online-threats/>

INDIRECT SUPPORT

- ***Documentation:***

This might be hard for someone facing harassment. This could be where you could support. This would involve documenting incidents and keeping a sequence of events.

- ***Social Capital:***

The number of reports of harassment on platforms is huge. Usually the teams on these platforms are overwhelmed by support requests. Though it is unfortunate sometime getting the attention of these support team needs a connect with them.

This might need dedicated effort and could contribute to addressing the harassment.

ASKING FOR DOCUMENTATION FROM SOMEONE FACING ONLINE HARASSMENT

Sometimes, online harassment might not be viewed as 'serious' as physical or in-person harassment, but this belief is deeply mistaken.

The toll that online harassment takes on mental health can be understated, especially in an era where so much of our communication happens online, leaving individuals feeling vulnerable and exposed.

Documenting harassment is a crucial step, and it's essential to approach this process with care and empathy. Begin by gently discussing the need for documentation with the individual affected; it's often best if the initiative comes from them. If they feel uncertain, take the time to share your supportive intentions and motivations behind documenting their experience.

Set a specific time, place, and date for your meeting, ensuring both parties understand the purpose of this gathering. When meeting in person, prepare the environment to be private, clean, and comfortable, fostering a sense of safety. Plan the details in advance, bringing items such as water, tissues, a notepad, or a recorder as needed. Your goal is to create an atmosphere filled with compassion, where the person feels safe and truly heard.

They may wish to articulate their experience by writing themselves, which can be therapeutic, but this should remain an option rather than a requirement.

During your first meeting, your focus should be twofold: to cultivate a safe and comfortable space for sharing and listening, and to take comprehensive notes that capture the complete picture. Don't worry about grammar or presentation at this stage; prioritise gathering all pertinent details.

Approach the conversation without judgement, asking questions not out of doubt but to ensure accuracy. Instead of saying, “are you sure this happened,” consider noting your questions for clarifications later. Even if there are different perspectives in their narrative, practice patience, allowing space for questions and clarification without rushing to conclusions.

Keep in mind that this documentation process could become emotionally overwhelming for both of you. Allow for breaks, take walks if necessary, enjoy a warm drink, or shift the conversation to lighter topics when needed.

Move at a pace that feels steady and stable for everyone involved, understanding that multiple meetings may be necessary to complete the documentation. Prioritise creating a safe and healthy space throughout these discussions, this helps anchoring the documentation process in a space that is empowering.

DOCUMENTING HARASSMENT

Documenting Harassment for a loved one would help reduce the harmful effects of harassment on someone. It would also help them to put together evidence for fighting against harassment.

If the harassment is long term or cross platform it would be helpful to maintain a log like this -

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1WRBK-bliBnu3TjWCqSOhyZhojiuanAbOAwfARWoq0VCA/edit?gid=0#gid=0>

What kind of incidents should you document ?

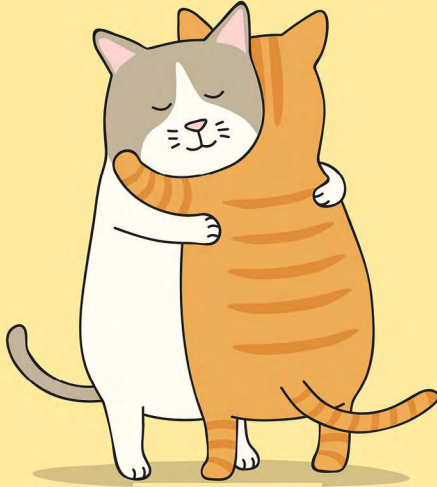
- Unusual activity in accounts (failed login attempts, unrecognised sessions)
- Messages, threats and mentions by the harasser
- Attempts to contact or follow
- Nature of the harassment
- Any other observations on behaviour or patterns
- Actions the harassed person takes in reaction e.g blocking an account in response to an abusive message

**** Sometimes this can be hard to understand. We recommend you reach out to organisations including us to know about this.***

DOCUMENTING EVIDENCE

- **Emails: Don't forward, save by printing or take screenshots**
- **Messages: Take screenshots , seek help from law enforcement for preservation. In whatsapp download the entire chat with metadata is better than storing screenshots.**
- **Social media: Download and archive messages. Take screenshot where not possible to download.**
- **Phone calls: Install a recorder and record conversations, screenshot call logs (Call Data Records can be obtained by the Police)**

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04

ADDITIONAL READING

SELF CARE THAT ONE CAN FOLLOW WHILE LOOKING AT SEXUAL HARASSMENT (AS WOMEN AND NON-BINARY PERSON)

On this journey of supporting someone who is going through harassment, it might help to remember that no matter what you are going through, you are not alone.

We are never alone. Support is amongst friends, community & the more than human beings in our world (like the various other living beings in our ecosystem) is always, always available for you.

Whilst honouring the confidentiality of the experience & narrative of the person you are supporting, remember that you can reach out to friends, community or even national distress helplines to be able to co-create space to address any distress that you might encounter yourself. With their consent, you can bring in another person who can support you and the person who is experiencing distress - someone who understands & someone you both can trust.

Supporting a person while they are going through something as distressing as harassment is an experience of extending deep care. Caring deeply for someone during a difficult time might be an energy depleting experience. What might help you is having a list of activities and practices that helps you recharge your batteries and creating some time and space for it.

While you might have your own list of awesome restorative practices, here is a short list that you might want to pick up from:

- Taking a long, nourishing (and pampering) hot water bath
- Going for a walk (preferably amidst nature) without a cell phone
- Scribbling, doodling or making art. What we find especially helpful is making collages - the experiences of tearing pictures & words and sticking them on a fresh sheet to make new meaning feels especially therapeutic,
- Working out/exercising/sweating it out with your favourite music
- Moving your body without agenda: just roll out a mat and show up on it & allow your body to lead your movements
- Sing (or find a place to scream) your heart out. If you live by a water body, screaming underwater is a refreshing, quiet and liberating experience :)
- Make a delicious meal for yourself, like as if you are your most favourite person in the world
- Make space to nature gaze, star gaze, hug a tree, water a plant, make friends with a butterfly or other elements in nature.
- Allow yourself to feel difficult emotions like sadness, grief, anger, tiredness: create space to feel them
- Make time to be silly and laugh

IDENTIFYING SECONDARY TRAUMA

Secondary trauma is the experience of feeling trauma-like symptoms after being exposed to someone else's painful experiences. It's an understandable response, as you may feel emotionally and psychologically overwhelmed, as if you were experiencing the harassment yourself.

The following are signs that you might be feeling emotionally or psychologically overwhelmed. You might experience some or a combination of all of them. In case you are having difficulty identifying these signs, please reach out to a mental health practitioner.

- Having consistent negative thoughts and feelings and being unable to resolve them or step out of them
- Feeling irrationally irritable or mood swings
- Feeling deeply anxious and helpless consistently
- Consistent loss of appetite and/or sleep.
- You might feel that your heart is racing, you experience shallow breathing frequently
- You notice a lack of concentration & are unable to complete your daily tasks with or without extra effort and/or support.

If you're going through this, please know it's not a reflection of weakness; rather, it signifies your deep sensitivity and compassion—qualities that the world desperately needs more of. This period can also serve as a valuable moment for you to pause and reflect on how to strengthen your support and care for yourself & those who are suffering.

You've likely stepped into this role out of a genuine concern for the well-being of others, and so it's perfectly normal to feel a certain degree of unease in these circumstances.

However, if you're identifying with a combination of the following signs, you may be experiencing secondary trauma:

- You feel a sense of deep overwhelm - emotionally & psychologically
- You feel a sense of hopelessness or helplessness that overpowers the sense of quiet inner pride and/or agency
- You feel like your inner strength is being deeply shaken and rattled, not in a way that is supportive or transformative but in a way that feels dis-empowering

It's important to acknowledge that there may be other signs to watch for, such as a persistent loss of appetite or difficulty sleeping. For those with a womb, irregular menstrual cycles might also be a sign of stress and secondary trauma.

Remember, you are the best judge of your own experiences, and it's okay to take the time to understand what you're feeling.

Being in solidarity with someone who is distressed can truly be an empowering and transformative experience, not just for them but for you as well.

To discern whether you're encountering secondary trauma or engaging in this deeply enriching process, you could take a moment to breathe deeply and tune into your body.

Ask your body, rather than your mind, the question: ***'Is this secondary trauma?'*** Trust the first response that arises; it will often be the most genuine and accurate reflection of your feelings.

Remember, offering support to someone in distress may inadvertently stir up memories of your own past trauma.

If you find yourself feeling triggered while supporting someone in distress, it's completely understandable to experience overwhelming emotions and a swirl of difficult feelings. In these moments, it's vital to prioritise your own well-being and take a step back before continuing to offer support.

You might also want to express your needs and establish gentle yet firm boundaries with the person you are trying to help, ensuring that both of you are respected & protected.

Again, it might feel counterintuitive to do this, but do prioritize your mental health and well-being. Taking a step back can help prevent your overwhelm from adding to the distress felt by you and those around you.

Your well-being matters, and taking this time for yourself may ultimately create a more positive outcome for everyone involved.

Remember, some of the challenges you may be working through as you support a survivor are often structural in nature and deeper than they usually appear.

It's important to recognise that these issues aren't easily resolved by just one or two individuals; they call for a thoughtful & collective approach over time.

Taking a moment to step back can not only provide you with a much-needed break but also grant you the opportunity to see the larger picture and return with renewed clarity and perspective.

OTHER RESOURCES

- ***What muslim women want you to know about online harassment and how to be a good ally***

<https://thebachchaoproject.org/digital-battlegrounds-what-muslim-women-want-you-to-know-about-online-harassment-and-its-real-life-implications/>

- ***Glossary on Online Harassment***

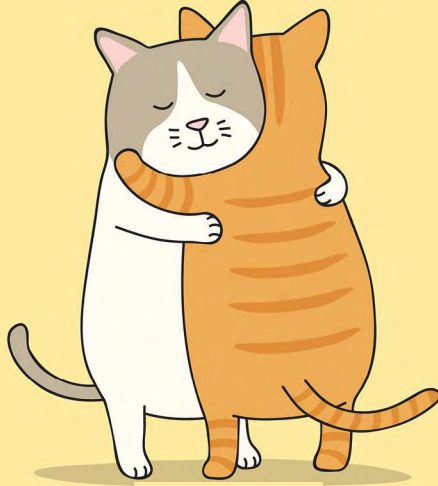
<https://womensmediacenter.com/speech-project/online-abuse-101>

<https://onlineharassmentfieldmanual.pen.org/defining-online-harassment-a-glossary-of-terms/>

- ***New York Times Social Media Self Dox Manual***

<https://open.nytimes.com/how-to-dox-yourself-on-the-internet-d2892b4c5954>

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