

What to Do If You're Sexually Bullied

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31 FOR
THIRTY-ONE
SCHOOL BULLYING PREVENTION



What to Do If You're Sexually Bullied

If you're a girl, chances are quite high that at some point in your life, someone will try to make you feel inferior or guilty for what they perceive as your sexuality or sexual behavior. How it affects you depends on factors like age, ethnicity, socio-economic background, and personality. This type of sexual bullying is unfair and upsetting, and it can be difficult to figure out how to react. We've all had those experiences where days or even weeks later, we come up with the perfect response.

Here are a few suggestions to put to use in the moment, depending on the situation and the person doing the sexual bullying:

IF IT'S A STRANGER IN THE HALLWAY

Harassment from a stranger can vary from slightly obnoxious to downright frightening. Since you don't know this person—and because they might be armed or mentally unstable—it's not usually a good idea to respond at all. Especially if you're alone, it's wisest to just keep walking until you get somewhere safe, like the principal's office, where you can confide in a member of the school administration. But if the scene feels generally safe and if you're comfortable speaking up, an easy way to stand up for yourself is just to say something like, "Oh, leave me alone," and roll your eyes. If the behavior continues, you can decide whether to report it to the school administration or which teacher you want to tell.

IF IT'S ONE OF YOUR PARENTS

If you live at home or are financially dependent on your parents, it's important to stand up for yourself while coming across as respectful. The generational gap can mean you and your parents are coming at all kinds of topics from different starting points, and issues surrounding female sexuality are no different. One tactic is to stress that your parents have raised you to respect yourself and your body—so now you'd like them to trust you. Stress that you appreciate that they're likely just trying to protect you, but their slut-shaming actually makes you feel anxious

and self-conscious. Say you know it's a dangerous world, but thanks to their upbringing—for which you are very thankful!—you are confident that you can navigate it safely while expressing yourself however you feel comfortable, whether that means wearing a skimpy dress or having safe, casual sex.

IF IT'S A FRIEND

Well-meaning friends might tell you they're "worried about" your sexual or romantic behavior. This isn't automatically sexual bullying, by any means. If they bring up aspects of your current relationship that they think are abusive, if you are having unprotected sex, or if something has happened to you that was not consensual, listen to this friend and consider what they say. In any other case, explain that you'd rather not discuss the sexual aspects of your life with them and then in the future, don't! There are some friends with whom you can chat about sex, and there are others who will be offended because their life choices in this area don't match yours. That's okay! Talk to them about something else and save those fun sex stories for a friend who won't judge you.

IF IT'S YOUR SIGNIFICANT OTHER

Sometimes, one partner's sexual history can make the other partner feel slightly insecure and jealous. If your partner approaches you in a respectful way and explains that they're trying to combat these feelings, reassure them that your sexual history is part of who you are now. If it were different, you'd be a different person—you might not have met them in the first place, and they might not have fallen in love with you! Not to mention that your sexual experience works out in their favor, since now you know what feels good for you and how to please a partner (ahem!). Furthermore, if your partner wants to know about your history with sexually transmitted infections, they deserve honest answers. But if they bring up your sexual history in a nasty way and don't actually want to have a reasonable conversation about it—if they repeatedly make comments about your sexual past, or imply that you're below them or "dirty," —this is a HUGE red flag. It's a common type of power play in a relationship, and it's a sign that your partner is manipulative. Finally, if you were the victim of a rape or sexual assault and your current sexual partner is not sensitive to your issues related to overcoming that trauma, or if they imply that you should feel ashamed or responsible for what happened, get out of that relationship immediately.

IF IT HAPPENS ONLINE

Online sexual bullying can feel really personal, especially if you know the person on the other end. For instance, you might have sent a nude picture to someone who asked you for one, and now they've shared it with others or even spread it around the Internet. If something like that happens to you, determine the best reaction for your mental health. It might be to get offline for a week or two—give yourself a mental break from the harassment, and soon it will pass. Oh, and end that friendship! If you're being privately cyberbullied by people you know, save screenshots so if you need to, you can use that information to come forward with a

harassment case against them. Then block them from your accounts and do your best to interact with more compassionate people online.

IF IT HAPPENS IN A SOCIAL SETTING

An acquaintance or even someone you've just met for the first time might slut-shame you either because of some information they've found out about you, because of how you look or what you're wearing, or just because they're a jerk. In this case, it's best to be non-aggressive.

It's an opportunity to start a conversation, if you feel like it. You could even include some mutual friends in that conversation. Simply ask, "Why does that bother you?" Or, "Why do you think you have that reaction?" The conversation can go from there, with you asking questions that invite them to explore their own insecurities. This directs the focus away from you, and instead points to the root of the problem: That their judgment of you is just a reflection of their own issues.

ABOUT EMILY LINDIN

At age 11, Emily was branded the school "slut" by her classmates. Now this Harvard grad, Ph.D. candidate, writer, and activist is working to undo sexual bullying in our schools, communities, media, and culture. Her *UnSlut Project* provides a safe space for sharing stories and creating awareness about sexual bullying, slut-shaming, gender inequality, and related issues.

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