

Sexual health and safety definitions

What is Sexual Health?

The World Health Organization defines sexual health as 'a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled' (World Health Organization, 2016).

The sexual health needs of people accessing services are often overlooked due to the focus on illness symptoms, substance use issues or functional impairment. Sexuality is a fundamental aspect of health and well-being for all individuals but is often a difficult and sensitive subject to discuss, even in the most trusting relationships (as cited in Queensland Health, 2016, p.3). Sexual health is an important consideration in our consumers as they can be vulnerable to poor sexual health and compromised sexual safety.

People have reported that they feel embarrassed and uncomfortable discussing their sexual health with a health provider. Here is a suggestion to start a conversation about sexual health and help people feel empowered to talk to you: 'Your sexual health is important. Are you taking care of yourself?'

What is Sexual Safety?

As outlined in the Queensland Health Sexual Health and Safety Guidelines (2016), sexual safety is the recognition, maintenance and mutual respect of the physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual boundaries between people (NSW Ministry of Health, 2013). Services have a responsibility to protect all persons from the unwanted and inappropriate behaviours of others, and behaviours of their own that they might not choose to engage in

when well (Victoria Department of Health, 2012). This includes sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexual acts because of the persons sexual disinhibition and sexual exploitation.

What is Sexual Assault?

Sexual assault is defined as any forced sexual act or behaviour that is unwanted, unwelcome and uninvited, therefore without consent. It covers a broad range of sexual activities including rape. Sexual assault was made a crime under the Criminal Code Act 1899. Sexual assault refers to a situation where a person unlawfully and indecently assaults another person; or procures another person, without the person's consent:

- to commit an act of gross indecency; or
- to witness an act of gross indecency by the person or any other person (Criminal Code Act, 1899).

Sexual assault is a humiliating, degrading and terrifying experience, which can have long-term negative health and social effects on its victims. Victims experience a range of feelings including shock, fear, guilt, shame, depression and an inability to trust others.

What is Sexual violence?

This term is far more broad than sexual assault. It includes acts that are not codified in law as criminal but are harmful and traumatic. Sexual violence includes using false promises, insistent pressure, abusive comments or reputational threats to coerce sex acts. It can encompass noncontact acts like catcalls and whistles, which can make women feel objectified and victimized. It includes non-consensual electronic capture and/or sharing of explicit images, exposure of genitals and surreptitious viewing of others naked or during sex.

What is Sexual harassment?

Sexual harassment is a much broader term than sexual assault, encompassing three categories of impermissible behaviour- sexual

coercion, unwanted sexual attention, and gender harassment.

Sexual coercion refers to implicit or explicit attempts to make work conditions contingent upon sexual cooperation. The classic 'sleep with me or you're fired' scenario is a perfect example of sexual coercion.

It is the most stereotypical form of sexual harassment, but also the rarest.

A second, and more common, form of sexual harassment is unwanted sexual attention: unwanted leering, touching, hugging, stroking, kissing, relentless pressure for dates or sexual behaviour. To constitute unlawful sexual harassment, the sexual advances must be unwelcomed and unpleasant to the recipient.

Unwanted sexual attention can include sexual assault and rape. If an employer were to forcibly kiss and grope a colleague without their consent, this would be an example of both unwanted sexual attention and sexual assault – both a civil offense and a crime.

Most sexual harassment, however, entails no sexual advance. This third and most common manifestation is gender harassment: conduct that disparages people based on gender but implies no sexual interest. Gender harassment can include crude sexual terms and images, for example, degrading comments about bodies or sexual activities, sexually offensive graffiti, suggestive or demeaning jokes or comments (e.g. blond moment). Often though, it is purely sexist, such as contemptuous remarks about women being ill-suited for leadership or men having no place in childcare.

Such actions constitute 'sexual' harassment because they are sex-based, not because they involve sexuality.

What is Sexual disinhibition?

Sexual disinhibition is an inability to restrain sexual impulses and involves behaviour or talk which is considered inappropriate for a particular environment. Behaviours can exist on a continuum and can escalate in severity, from an increase in sexual thoughts through to indiscriminate sexual activity (New South Wales Ministry of Health, 2013).

Consent to sexual activity

The Queensland Health *Sexual Health and Safety Guidelines* state that consensual sex is when parties are over the age of 16 and agree to engage in an activity that is sexual in nature (touching, oral sex, intercourse) by choice, and have the freedom and capacity to make that choice. This means agreeing to sexual relations without fear, coercion, force or intimidation. Giving consent is active, not passive. It means freely choosing to say 'yes' and also being free to change your mind at any time. This does not include: being unconscious, asleep, intoxicated, drugged, or otherwise unable to say 'yes' or having a psychological or decision-making disability that impacts on the ability to understand what a person is consenting to. Example of non-consensual sex. 'I've been going out with this guy for a few months. He wanted me to have sex with him, but I wasn't ready. He started to shout and get really angry. I gave in to him because I was so scared.'

Sources

Australian Human Rights Commission. (2017). Change the course: *National report on sexual assault and sexual harassment at Australian universities*

https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/AHRC_2017_ChangeTheCourse_UniversityReport.pdf

The Conversation, Politics and Society. (2018). What's the difference between sexual abuse, sexual assault, sexual harassment and rape? The Conversation Media Group Ltd

<http://theconversation.com/whats-the-difference-between-sexual-abuse-sexual-assault-sexual-harassment-and-rape-88218>

Queensland Health: *Sexual health and safety guidelines 2016*

https://www.health.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0030/426828/gh-qdl-434.pdf

1800 RESPECT (Ph: 1800 737 732) – National Sexual Assault, Domestic Family Violence Counselling Service

Queensland Health: *Sexual health and safety guidelines 2016*

https://www.health.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0030/426828/gh-qdl-434.pdf

Queensland Police Service <https://www.police.qld.gov.au/programs/adultassault/adultasslt.htm>

The Most Important Rule of Sex: Consent (Qld). <https://www.health.qld.gov.au/news-events/news/the-most-important-rule-of-sex-consent#:~:text=In%20Queensland%2C%20it%20is%20illegal,to%20engage%20in%20sexual%20activities>