

Handling the “Handsy” Co-Worker

Vicki Norton, MD FAAEM

Affiliate Faculty, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL

Vice President of FLAAEM, the Florida Chapter Division of AAEM

I once worked with a nurse who had a fetish. He loved to touch earlobes. It was mostly weird but also quite funny — until he started touching my ears. Not only was this an awkward invasion of my personal space, it felt unprofessional. I am happily married and I didn't want to give people the impression that I was flirting at work. And what a terrible way to flirt! What is proper workplace etiquette? What is considered harmless and what is harmful? Are we all just being too uptight? Who doesn't like a free back rub?

I do want to make the distinction between physical harassment and physical contact in the workplace. When do friendly touches at work

become harassment? The answer is not always clear-cut. Everyone has different personal boundaries and comfort levels with physical contact. While sexual harassment can include unwanted physical contact, not everyone who is touched at work is being sexually harassed. Harassment becomes apparent when the physical contact is perceived as sexual in nature, unwelcome, and leads to a “hostile work environment.” A few isolated shoulder massages may not be considered harassing, but would be awkward if not wanted.

In a recent report in *JAMA*, 30% of female physicians and 4% of male physicians reported being sexually harassed, which included unwanted sexual comments, attention or advances by a superior or colleague.¹ Almost half the women in the study said their sexual harassment experiences had also negatively affected their career advancement. Most of us have had some training regarding sexual harassment in the workplace, in some cases even mandated by a complaint filed by a co-worker. Sexual harassment is defined under law as follows: “It is unlawful to harass a person (an applicant or employee) because of that person's sex. Harassment can include “sexual harassment” or unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature.”² We are professionals and we should have a code of conduct for how we behave at work. In 2006 AAEM, in conjunction with the Emergency Nurses Association, submitted a position paper regarding a professional code of conduct.³ The paper describes a work environment free of verbal, physical, or sexual harassment and free from retaliation for reporting such offenses. Harassment should not be tolerated. If you are being harassed, you should stand up for yourself. Be aware of the resources that are available to you, including your human resources department, ED director, and hospital administrators.

Sometimes touching at work is welcomed, like that shoulder rub my male colleagues always seem to get from a female nurse. But it can appear unprofessional. Even when you are comfortable with the level of contact, misconceptions and rumors abound in the workplace. Would your wife/husband like to see someone massaging you at work? Probably not. And



will co-workers start making assumptions about your married life if they see that same co-worker giving you a rubdown every shift? Most definitely.

If the physical contact you are receiving from a co-worker is making you feel awkward, there are a few strategies you can use to address the situation.⁴ The first would be to make a joke. You can say, “Well this has been really creepy, let's not do it again (forced smile).” This may not make the unwanted touching stop. So next up, be honest. Tell the person touching you (in a direct, but polite way) that it is unwelcome and making you feel uncomfortable. This does not mean yell and make a scene. Just pull them aside and let them

know. People have different perceptions of what they are doing and may not even realize they are making you feel awkward. Still being touched? Be rude. Say something to make the toucher uncomfortable with what they are doing, “Ewww, don't touch me, you molester.” Warning: this may damage your work relationship with the person. If all else fails, report it. Go to your ER director, nurse manager, or human resources and file a complaint about the behavior. This isn't necessary if you can just talk it out. However, if talking is ineffective or if the person touching you is your superior, you may need to take it to this level.

If you are the one doing the touching, here are some good rules of thumb (no pun intended).⁴

1. Don't touch people at work. Think of your co-workers as strangers. Until you get to know them and their personal space requirements really well, just keep your hands to yourself.
2. Be aware of other people's reactions. If your co-worker cringes every time you pull them into a hug or high five, it's time to rethink your greeting strategy.
3. Germs, people. Stop spreading disease with touching.

In summary, if touching, reel it in. If being touched, don't be afraid to speak your mind. And if you're being harassed, don't tolerate it!

References

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