RIVALSHOT ACADEMY · COURSE BOOK

Clear Boundaries: Harassment, Pressure and Saying No

The companion book to the RivalShot Academy course

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Foreword: How to use this book

This book goes with the six lessons of the RivalShot Academy course Clear Boundaries: Harassment, Pressure and Saying No. It was written for women and girls first, and for everyone. Harassment and pressure do not choose people by gender, age, ability or background, and the skills here are for anyone who needs them.

Each chapter follows one lesson. It develops the lesson's ideas further, then gives you two short fictional cases ("In practice"), a checklist, key terms, three questions to talk through with a friend or group, and a journal prompt. All of the people and places in this book are invented. None of them is based on a real person or a real business.

A few promises before you start.

You can stop at any time. Some of this material may bring up memories. If it does, put the book down, do something that helps you settle, and come back later, or not at all. Reading about a subject is never more important than how you feel.

Nothing here asks you to confront anyone. Saying nothing, moving away, leaving, asking staff and calling for help are always valid choices. This is not a physical self-defense book, and it contains no fighting techniques.

It is never your fault. The person who harasses chooses that behavior. Whatever you did in the moment, including freezing, smiling, laughing, going along, staying or leaving, was a way of getting through it.

This is not legal, medical or professional advice. Where the book mentions official agencies, deadlines or phone numbers, they come from official pages that were read on 2026-10-15. Laws, deadlines and services vary by place and change over time. Always check the official source for your situation.

You can read the book straight through, or go to the chapter you need. If you are reading with a group, the “Talk it through” questions work well as a starting point. If you are reading alone, the journal prompts are there for you, and you never have to share what you write.

Chapter 1. A short, clear no

Many of us were taught how to say yes graciously. Fewer of us were taught how to say no in a way that ends a conversation instead of starting one. This chapter is about that skill. It is small, it is learnable, and it is worth practicing before you need it.

What a boundary is

A boundary is a statement about you: what you will and will not accept, and what you are going to do next. It is not a rule you place on someone else, and it is not a request for their permission. “I don’t want to share my number” is a boundary. “You’re not allowed to ask me for my number” is an attempt to control someone else’s behavior, which nobody can actually do. The difference matters, because it keeps your attention on the part you control: your words, your movement and your next step.

A boundary also does not need the other person’s agreement to be real. People sometimes wait, without realizing it, for the other person to say “Okay, fair enough” before they feel entitled to their no. You do not need that. Your no counts the moment you say it, and it still counts if the other person argues, sulks or ignores it.

Why fewer words work

When we feel awkward, we tend to over-explain. We add reasons, apologies, softeners and jokes, hoping that a good enough explanation will make the other person accept our answer gracefully. Sometimes it does. But when someone is pressuring you, every extra word is something they can pick up and argue with.

Consider how reasons get taken apart. “I’m busy today” invites “What about tomorrow?” “I don’t really drink” invites “Get a soda, then.” “I have a partner” invites “They don’t have to know.” “I’m not looking to date right now” invites “Who said anything about dating?” Each reason is a problem the other person can try to solve. Once they have solved it, you are back where you started, and now you may feel as if you owe them a yes.

A plain no has no problem in it to solve. “No. I’m not sharing my number” leaves no gap for negotiation. It is not rude; it is clear. Being clear can help a conversation end sooner, because there is nothing left to discuss.

Building your line

A useful structure has two parts: what you do not want, and what happens now.

- “No. I’m not sharing my number.”
- “Please stop. I’m going back to my book.”
- “I don’t want a hug. A wave is fine.”
- “No thanks. I’m heading out now.”
- “I’m not discussing that. Let’s get back to the agenda.”

Each line is under ten words, contains no apology and no reason, and ends with something you control. The second half matters. It moves the moment forward, and it tells the other person, and you, what comes next.

You can adapt the line to the setting. At work, “I’d like you to stop commenting on my appearance” is clear and professional. With a classmate, “Stop. That’s not funny to me” is enough. Online, “Please don’t message me again” is complete, and you do not have to reply after that.

Tone, volume and delivery

You do not have to be cold to be clear. “No, thank you,” said warmly, is still a no. What matters is that the content is unmistakable. Keep your voice level and a little slower than usual; rushing tends to sound like an apology. Volume is your choice. Speaking so that people nearby can hear can bring in witnesses and make it more likely that someone checks on you. Speaking quietly is fine too, especially if you would rather not draw attention.

You do not have to hold eye contact, smile, or arrange your face to make the other person comfortable. Many people, and many women and girls in particular, have been taught to soften a no with a smile. If that is your habit, it is not wrong, but you are allowed to skip it.

Delivery can be anything that carries the message. A shake of the head, a raised palm, a note typed on your phone and turned around, or a card you keep in your bag all count. That matters for people who are Deaf or hard of hearing, people who do not speak or who speak with difficulty, people talking in a second language, and anyone who is simply too rattled to find words.

Practice while it is easy

Stress narrows our choices. Under pressure, the mind tends to reach for what is familiar, which for many of us is a polite, apologetic answer. A line you have already spoken out loud is easier to find in that moment than one you have to invent. So practice. Write two or three lines for situations you actually meet, then say them out loud in the car, in the shower, to a friend or to a mirror. Young people can practice with a parent, an older sibling, a teacher or another trusted adult. It may feel silly. That is fine.

When a request comes back, repeat the same words. You do not owe a fresh answer every time the question changes shape. Repetition is its own kind of clarity: it signals that the answer is not going to change.

A yes can become a no

A boundary is not fixed. You might enjoy a conversation for ten minutes and then want it to end. You might accept a ride once and decide not to accept another. You might agree to coffee and then decide you do not want to stay for a second cup. “I’m done chatting now,” “Not this time” and “I’ve changed my mind” are as valid as a no at the very start. An earlier yes does not create a debt. Agreeing to one thing is not agreeing to the next.

At work and at school

At work, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) encourages employees to tell the harasser directly that the conduct is unwelcome and must stop, and to report it to management early, before it escalates. That advice assumes it is safe and possible to say something directly. If it is not, because the person has power over you, because you are afraid, or because you simply cannot, reporting is still available, and Chapter 5 covers it. The same is true at school: you can say something, you can tell a trusted adult, or both.

What a boundary can and cannot do

A clear sentence is powerful, but it is not magic. It cannot control what another person does next. Some people will respect it immediately. Some will push. If someone ignores your no, that tells

you about their choices, not about the quality of your words. It never means you said it wrong, and it never makes what they do next your fault.

A short no is also a tool, not a duty. You never have to say anything. Walking away, putting in headphones, ignoring a comment or going straight to staff are complete responses. Having a line ready does not mean you must stay and use it.

In practice

The pickup counter. On a Tuesday morning, Dana, a sixty-two-year-old retired bus driver, waits for her drink at a busy café. Another customer chats with her about the weather, which is pleasant enough. Then the customer asks which street she lives on "around here." Dana feels the conversation shift. She says, at an ordinary volume, "I don't share that," and turns toward the counter. The customer laughs and says she is being unfriendly. Dana says the same words again and steps closer to the barista. She does not apologize, invent a story or debate whether she is friendly. When her drink arrives, she leaves.

The study group. Sam, nineteen, is in a study group chat for a college course. One member starts sending Sam private messages late at night, first about assignments, then about Sam's looks. Sam replies once: "Please keep messages to coursework." The next message is a joke about Sam being "so serious." Sam does not reply. Sam mutes the conversation, saves screenshots, and decides to mention it to the course tutor if it continues. Sam's one clear line stated the boundary. The silence afterward was a boundary too.

Checklist

- I have two or three boundary lines of ten words or fewer.
- My lines name what I do not want and what happens next.
- I have said them out loud at least once.
- I know I can repeat the same words instead of finding new ones.
- I know a gesture, a typed note or a card counts as a no.
- I know I can change my mind, and an earlier yes does not lock me in.
- I know I never have to say anything, and walking away is a complete answer.

Key terms

- **Boundary:** a statement about what you will and will not accept, and what you will do next.
- **Softener:** an apology, a maybe or a reason added to a no to make it feel gentler; it often invites bargaining.
- **Repeat line:** using the same words each time a request returns, so the answer does not look open.
- **Unwelcome conduct:** behavior the person receiving it did not invite and does not want.

Talk it through

1. Why do you think so many people, especially women and girls, are taught to soften or explain a no? What does that cost them?
2. When might a short no not be the best choice for you, and what would you do instead?

3. How could you help a younger person practice a boundary line without making it feel like a test?

Journal prompt

Write two boundary sentences of ten words or fewer that sound like you. Then write one sentence about how you would like to feel the first time you use one.

Chapter 2. When a no gets tested

Many people hear a no and adjust. They might be disappointed or a little embarrassed, but they move on. Boundary-testing is what happens when someone does not. They treat your no as the opening of a negotiation, and they keep looking for the version of the request you will finally accept. This chapter is about recognizing that pattern early, without becoming suspicious of everyone.

Watch behavior, not identity

Testing is about what someone does, not who they are or how they look. People of every age, gender, background, job and appearance can test boundaries, and plenty of friendly strangers, coworkers and classmates never do. Ideas about what "that type of person" looks like are not only unfair; they are unreliable, and they pull your attention away from the information that actually matters.

So replace "Does this person seem like the type?" with a better question: "What did they do after I set a limit?" That question works for everyone. It does not require you to guess at anyone's intentions or character. It only asks you to notice behavior.

The shapes testing takes

Testing tends to come in a handful of recognizable forms. Naming them makes them easier to spot.

The re-ask. The same request comes back in different clothes. “Okay, not your number. What’s your username?” “Fine, not dinner. Just a coffee?” The request has not changed. Only the wrapping has.

The shrink. The request is made to sound tiny, so that refusing it seems unreasonable. “Just one drink.” “Only a minute.” “It’s only a hug.” Small requests can still be unwanted, and you can still say no to them.

The guilt label. Your no is turned into a flaw in you. “Wow, I was only being nice.” “Why are you so uptight?” “You must be fun at parties.” The goal is to make you defend your character, and the quickest way to do that is to give in.

The unasked favor. Someone carries your bag, pays for your coffee or fixes something for you when you did not ask, then behaves as if you owe them something back: your time, your number, your company. You do not. A favor you did not request creates no debt.

The creep closer. Your space shrinks a little at a time. A chair inched nearer. A hand on your arm “by accident.” Following you to the next aisle, the next seat or the next room.

The joke check. A remark is made, often about your body or about sex, and then the speaker watches your reaction. If you object, they say “Relax, I’m kidding.” The joke was a test of what you would tolerate.

The quiet spot. An invitation to somewhere with fewer people: “Let’s talk outside.” “My car’s right here.” “Come see the back room.”

When small steps add up

Any one of these, on its own, may be nothing more than clumsy manners. What turns it into information is a no that gets pushed, especially more than once, or a run of small steps that each ask for a little more of your time, space, attention or personal details. The request itself matters less than what happens after you decline it.

It also helps to notice where the pushing points. Requests that move toward getting you alone, getting your contact details or schedule, or getting physically closer are the ones worth tracking most carefully. A person who keeps steering toward those things after you have said no is showing you a direction of travel.

The U.S. Department of Justice's equal employment guidance for its own staff gives examples of harassing conduct that include pressuring someone for dates, unwanted sexual teasing, offensive remarks and unwelcome touching. Several of the testing shapes above fit neatly inside those examples. You do not need a label to take them seriously.

Over days and screens

Testing can stretch out over time and move onto your phone. Messages keep coming after you stop replying. A new account appears after you block one. Someone turns up at your gym, your bus stop or your workplace at times when they know you will be there. The Office on Violence Against Women at the U.S. Department of Justice describes stalking as a course of conduct directed at a specific person that would cause a reasonable person to fear for their safety or the safety of others, or to suffer substantial emotional distress.

You do not have to decide whether something counts as stalking before taking it seriously. If repeated contact is making you afraid or wearing you down, that is enough reason to start keeping a record (Chapter 5) and to talk to someone.

Count the nos, and trust your body

A simple technique: count the nos. Keep a silent tally. "That's the second time I've said no." Once your no has come back to you even once, you do not need to say it better or explain it more. You already have the information you need. Some people find it useful to name the pattern aloud, briefly: "I already answered." It is short, true and hard to argue with.

Pay attention to your body as well. A tightening in your stomach, a sudden urge to laugh something off, your eyes checking where the door is, a wish that someone you know would walk in: these are signals worth noticing, even before you can explain them. You do not have to justify them to anyone before you act on them. Moving, leaving or asking for help does not require proof.

What noticing is not

Noticing a test is not accusing anyone, and it is not a reason to treat friendly people as suspects. Plenty of people ask once, hear no and move on. That is ordinary social life, and it is worth enjoying.

Noticing a test also does not mean you should have spotted it sooner. Pressure often works precisely because each step is small and wrapped in politeness, and because many of us were taught to give people the benefit of the doubt. If you went along

with a step or two before something felt wrong, that was not agreement to the next step. It is not your fault, and it does not take away your right to say no now.

In practice

The bakery counter. Mei is sixteen and works weekend shifts at the front counter of a neighborhood bakery. A regular customer compliments her smile, and she gives a polite half-smile back. The next week, the customer makes a remark about her body and calls it a joke; when she does not laugh, the customer says, "Relax, it's a compliment." The week after, the customer asks what time her shift ends and whether she gets a ride home. Each step could be brushed off. Together, they keep reaching for more access to her. Mei notices the schedule question as the step that matters. She says, "I don't share my schedule," and tells her shift lead before her break. Her shift lead arranges for someone else to serve that customer and walks out with her at closing.

The fitness class. Joan is seventy-four and goes to a morning exercise class at a community center. A fellow attendee offers to carry her bag to her car. She says, "No, thanks, I'm fine." The next week, he is waiting by the door and offers again, then asks which part of town she lives in. She says no again. The week after, he mentions he saw her car at the grocery store. Joan counts: three nos, and the requests are moving toward her car and her neighborhood. She tells the front desk what has happened, in plain terms, and asks a friend from class to walk out with her for a while. She does not have to decide what his intentions are to decide that she wants some company in the parking lot.

Checklist

- I ask “What did they do after I said no?” instead of “Do they seem like the type?”
- I can name at least four shapes testing takes.
- I keep a silent count of my nos.
- I notice requests that point toward getting me alone, getting my details or getting closer.
- I take repeated contact across days or screens seriously, even without a label for it.
- I pay attention to body signals and let myself act on them.
- I remember that going along with an earlier step is not agreement to the next.

Key terms

- **Boundary-testing:** treating someone’s no as the start of a negotiation, through repeated or reshaped requests.
- **Re-ask:** the same request returning in a new form after a no.
- **Shrink:** making a request sound so small that refusing seems unreasonable.
- **Guilt label:** turning someone’s no into a flaw in their character.
- **Unasked favor:** help you did not request, used to create a feeling of debt.
- **Course of conduct:** a pattern of repeated behavior directed at a specific person over time.

Talk it through

1. Which shape of testing do you think is easiest to miss, and why?
2. How can you stay alert to boundary-testing without becoming suspicious of everyone friendly?
3. What makes it hard to trust a body signal when you cannot explain it yet?

Journal prompt

Describe, in general terms and without naming anyone, a moment when you felt a request change from friendly to pushy. What was the first signal, and what would you like to do when you notice it next time?

Chapter 3. Respond, move or leave: your call

When someone pushes past your boundary, it can feel as if there are only two options: stand up to them, or put up with it. Both can feel bad. This chapter is about the much wider set of choices you actually have, and about giving yourself permission to choose whichever one fits the moment.

More than two choices

Here are some of the real responses available to you:

- **Say nothing.** Silence is a response. You do not owe anyone an answer.
- **Say one line.** A short, clear sentence, as in Chapter 1.
- **Move.** Change seats, step closer to staff, join a group, move to a busier train car, or walk to a better-lit part of the street.
- **Leave.** End the visit, the conversation or the errand.
- **Get help.** Ask staff, a friend or someone nearby, or call for help.

You can combine these, switch between them, and change your mind at any point. Starting with a line does not oblige you to keep talking. Moving does not mean you cannot leave. You decide based on what you want the next few minutes to look like, not on what you think you should prove.

Questions that help you choose

When you have a moment to think, a few quick questions can help:

- Where is the nearest way out, and where are other people?
- Is the person getting closer, louder or more insistent, or are they settling down?
- Am I alone, or is someone with me?
- What do I actually need right now: to finish an errand, get to my car, get home, or just get some space?
- How much energy do I have today?

There is no formula, but some patterns help. Responding can make sense in a public, staffed place when the behavior is mild and you feel steady. Moving or leaving makes sense when things are escalating, when you are isolated, when your no has already been pushed, or simply when you would rather not deal with it. That last reason is enough on its own. You never need a more dramatic reason to leave.

Leaving is not losing. It is deciding where your time and attention go.

Before you need it

You can make the choice easier long before you need it. When you arrive somewhere, notice two things: where the door is and where the staff are. It takes a few seconds, and nobody can tell you are doing it. Sitting with a view of the room, or near the counter, keeps your options open without changing your plans.

This is not about expecting trouble. It is the same everyday habit as noticing where the restrooms are. It simply means that if you do decide to move, you already know where to go.

The exit pair

A practical technique is the exit pair: one short sentence plus one move. “I’m going now,” and then go. You do not need to wait for permission, for a gap in the other person’s talking, or for them to agree that leaving is okay.

If you are sitting, stand and take only what you need: your phone, keys and bag. A coffee, a half-finished meal or a library book can stay behind. Move toward people, light and staff rather than toward a quiet corner, an empty stairwell or your car in an empty lot.

When leaving is not simple

Sometimes you cannot just walk out: you are at work, in a class, on a long flight, or waiting for a bus you need to catch. Leaving the situation can still mean leaving the conversation. You can move within the space, such as to another desk, another row or the other end of the platform. You can ask for a change: “Could I switch seats?” “Could I work in the other room today?” You can put in headphones, turn back to your task and stop answering. You can tell the person in charge, such as a flight attendant, a teacher, a supervisor or a driver, what is happening and what you need. And you can decide to report later, when you are somewhere calmer, using the record described in Chapter 5. Being unable to leave the building does not mean you have to stay in the exchange.

If you think you are being followed

If you think someone is following you, head somewhere busy and staffed, such as a shop, a hotel lobby, a pharmacy or a station office, rather than to your car or home. Call or message someone you trust and tell them where you are. Ask staff for help. In the United States, if you are in immediate danger, call 911. The Office on Violence Against Women's resource pages give the same instruction. Journeys, stations and parking are a related topic of their own.

Freezing is normal

Under sudden pressure, many people go blank. They smile, laugh nervously, agree to something, or go along with a situation until they can get away. This is a common stress response, not weakness, and it is not a choice to accept anything. Your body was trying to get you through the moment, and it did.

If you froze in the past, you are not alone, and it was not your fault. Next time you might have a rehearsed line ready, or you might freeze again. Both are human. The aim of practicing is to give yourself more options, not to judge the ones you had. What stress does to attention and choices is a related topic of its own.

Harassment and arguments are different

This chapter is about pressure and harassment aimed at you. A heated disagreement, such as a mix-up over an order, a parking space or a place in a queue, is a different situation with some of the same answers. Exiting an argument is a related topic with its own approach. The shared idea is simple: you do not have to finish a conversation that someone else is using to keep you there.

What this does not mean

Choosing to respond does not oblige you to keep responding, and choosing to leave does not mean you overreacted. Nobody is required to confront anyone, in this book or anywhere else. There is no single right answer you can fail. The goal is not to make you braver. It is to remind you that you are allowed to decide, to change your mind, and to put your own safety and comfort ahead of someone else's opinion of you.

In practice

The parking garage. Rosa, a thirty-four-year-old nurse, walks into a parking garage after a late shift. A person waiting by the elevator comments on how tired she looks, asks which car is hers and offers to walk her to it. She says, "No thanks." When the elevator arrives, the person steps in behind her and stands closer than the space requires. Rosa steps back out before the doors close, walks to the staffed booth at the garage entrance, and asks the attendant if she can wait there for a few minutes. When she feels ready, the attendant watches her walk to her car. It costs her ten minutes. She never needed to know what the person intended. She only needed to notice that her no had been ignored and that she had a better place to be.

The bus. Teo is fifty, uses a cane, and rides the same bus to work every morning. One day a passenger sits beside him and starts making comments about his cane and asking where he works. Teo says, "I'd rather not talk, thanks," and turns to the window. The passenger keeps going. Teo stands at the next stop, moves to the seat behind the driver, and says to the driver, "That passen-

ger keeps bothering me. I'm going to sit here." The driver nods. Teo did not win an argument or explain himself. He moved toward the person whose job includes looking after riders.

Checklist

- I know I can say nothing, say one line, move, leave or get help, and switch at any time.
- When I arrive somewhere, I notice the door and where staff are.
- I have an exit pair ready: one sentence and one move.
- I know I can leave things behind.
- If I think I am being followed, I go somewhere busy and staffed, not home or to my car.
- In immediate danger in the United States, I call 911.
- I know freezing is a normal response and not my fault.

Key terms

- **Exit pair:** one short sentence combined with one move away from the situation.
- **Escalation:** behavior that is getting closer, louder, more insistent or more personal.
- **Freeze response:** going blank, going along or being unable to act under sudden stress; a common and normal reaction.
- **Staffed place:** a location where someone is working who can help, such as a counter, desk, booth or station office.

Talk it through

1. What makes leaving feel like “losing” for some people? Where do you think that idea comes from?
2. Think of a place you go often. What would make moving or leaving easier there?
3. How would you respond to a friend who says they “should have done something” when they froze?

Journal prompt

Pick a place you go often, without writing its address. Describe where you would move to, which way you would leave, and the exit sentence you would use. Then write one sentence giving yourself permission to use it.

Chapter 4. Bring in staff and allies

You do not have to handle pressure on your own. Staff, coworkers, friends and people nearby can change a situation simply by becoming part of it. Sometimes the arrival of one more person is enough to end the pressure. This chapter is about how to ask in a way that gets useful help.

Why a specific request works

A worried look, a sigh or a quiet "help" leaves people guessing. Is something wrong? What should they do? Would they be overstepping? Many people want to help but hesitate when they are unsure. A specific request removes the guesswork: "This customer keeps asking for my number after I said no. Can I wait by the register?" Now the barista knows what is happening and exactly how to help.

There is another reason to be specific. When a lot of people can see something happening, each person may assume that someone else will step in. A general appeal to a room can leave everyone waiting for everyone else. A request to one named or clearly identified person can help get past that.

The three-part ask

A dependable structure has three parts:

1. **What is happening.** "This person keeps commenting on my body."
2. **What you have already done.** "I've told them to stop."

3. **What you need.** “Can I wait behind the counter until my ride comes?”

Other useful endings include:

- “Could someone walk me to the door?”
- “Could you ask this customer to give me some space?”
- “Is there somewhere I can make a phone call?”
- “Can you call me a taxi?”
- “Could you stay with me until my friend gets here?”

Describe what was said or done, not what you think the person is like. You do not need to label them, guess at their reasons or diagnose them. You also do not need to prove anything before you ask.

Who to ask

People whose jobs involve the public may have dealt with this before: baristas, front-desk staff, bus and train operators, librarians, ushers, security officers, shop assistants, teachers, coaches and receptionists. Some workplaces have a plan for exactly this situation. You are not interrupting their work. In a real sense, you are giving them the information they need to do it.

Allies who are not staff

Sometimes there is no staff member nearby. Then you can ask someone else. Pick one person and be direct: “Excuse me, you in the blue jacket, could you stand with me for a minute? This person won’t leave me alone.” Someone may well say yes. If they say no or ignore you, ask someone else.

You can also:

- Join a group of people, such as a family waiting at the same stop.
- Call or video-call a friend and say where you are: “Hi, I’m at the café on the corner. Can you stay on the line while I walk out?”
- Agree on a code word with friends or family in advance, meaning “call me with an excuse” or “come and get me.”

At work and at school

At work, allies include supervisors, human resources, union representatives and trusted colleagues. The EEOC explains that workplace harassment can come from a supervisor, a coworker, or even a non-employee such as a customer or client, and it encourages reporting to management early, before the behavior escalates. It also explains that an employer’s responsibility for harassment by coworkers or non-employees can depend on whether the employer knew or should have known about it and took prompt action. That is one practical reason to tell someone with authority, ideally in writing, so there is a clear record that they were told.

At school, students can start with any trusted adult: a teacher, counselor, coach, nurse or someone in the school office. That person can help find the school’s reporting process. Parents and caregivers can help too.

When the person has power over you

Asking for help is harder when the person pressuring you is your manager, your teacher, your coach, your landlord, or someone your family depends on. The usual route of “tell the person in

charge" may lead straight back to them. In that situation, go around or above them. At work, that can mean their manager, human resources, a union representative or another senior colleague you trust; the EEOC notes that harassment can come from a supervisor, and it encourages employers to set up a clear complaint process. At school, it can mean a different teacher, a counselor, the principal's office or a parent. Outside work and school, a friend, a family member or an advocate from a hotline can help you think through who to tell. You do not need to have a perfect plan before you tell one person you trust.

Friends after the moment

Support matters after the moment as well as during it. The U.S. Department of Justice's equal employment guidance for its own staff suggests seeking support from a friend or colleague when harassment happens. Someone who knows what is going on can notice if it continues, walk with you, sit near you in meetings, or simply remind you that you are not imagining it. Choose people who listen without judging, and tell them what kind of help you want: "I don't need advice. I just need you to know."

Asking for help online

Pressure that arrives through a screen needs allies too. Many apps, games and platforms have tools to mute, block and report an account, and many group spaces have moderators or administrators whose role is to deal with exactly this. A three-part message works there as well: "This member keeps messaging me privately after I asked them to stop. I've muted them. Can you review their messages?" Save screenshots before you block, as Chapter 5 explains. And tell a person you trust offline, too; being

harassed online can feel isolating, and someone who knows can check in on you. Privacy settings are a related topic worth exploring on their own.

When help does not come

Staff cannot always fix a situation, and sometimes the first person you ask will not help. That can be disappointing, and even upsetting. If it happens, ask someone else, leave, or call for help. Their response is not a verdict on whether your concern was real.

Asking for help is not making a scene, and it is not a burden. Your request is for presence, space, a seat, a phone call or a walk to the door, not for someone to fight on your behalf.

The other side of this, how to be a useful ally when you see someone else being harassed, is a related topic of its own.

In practice

The visitor center. Luis is seventy, Deaf, and visiting a city visitor center to pick up a transit map. A person handing out tour flyers keeps tapping his shoulder and stepping in front of him after he has shaken his head twice. Luis types on his phone, “This person won’t stop following me. Can you help?” and shows it to the volunteer at the information desk. The volunteer nods, invites Luis to finish choosing his map at the end of the desk, and asks the flyer person to move along. Luis did not need to speak, explain or argue. He showed one clear message to the person whose role is to help.

The restaurant floor. Hana, twenty-seven, is a server. A regular customer at one of her tables keeps touching her arm when she takes orders, and last week made a comment about her body.

She has told him, “Please don’t touch me.” Tonight he does it again. Between tables, she goes to her manager and says, “The customer at table nine keeps touching my arm. I’ve told him not to. Can someone else take that table, and can you talk to him?” The manager moves the table to another server and speaks to the customer. Hana writes a short note about it after her shift and emails it to herself on her personal account.

Checklist

- I know the three-part ask: what is happening, what I have done, what I need.
- I have one ready-made request for staff in places I go often.
- I know to pick one specific person rather than appeal to a room.
- I have a friend I could call and stay on the line with.
- I have a code word agreed with someone, or I plan to set one up.
- At work or school, I know who I would tell, by role.
- If the first person cannot help, I will ask someone else, leave or call for help.

Key terms

- **Ally:** anyone who helps by being present, making space, calling someone or walking with you.
- **Three-part ask:** a request that says what is happening, what you have done and what you need.
- **Non-employee harassment:** harassment at work by someone who is not on staff, such as a customer or client.

- **Code word:** a word agreed in advance with a friend or family member that signals you need a call or a pickup.

Talk it through

1. Why do you think people hesitate to ask for help even when it is available?
2. Which of the specific requests in this chapter would you feel most comfortable using? Which feels hardest?
3. If you were the barista or front-desk worker, what would you want someone to tell you?

Journal prompt

For two places you go often, write the role of someone you could ask for help there and the exact three-part ask you would use. Then write what you would do if that person could not help.

Chapter 5. Write it down and know your reporting options

After harassment, details fade quickly. Over time, exact words can blur, times can drift and the order of events gets muddled. Yet those details are often exactly what you will want later, whether to report, to show that something has happened more than once, or simply to trust your own memory when someone suggests you are exaggerating. This chapter covers a simple same-day note and an overview of where reporting routes begin.

Everything in this chapter is optional. You are not building a court case, and you do not have to decide anything today.

Why a same-day note helps

A short record made close to the event does three things. It preserves details while they are fresh. It shows a pattern if the behavior happens again, which can matter a great deal in a report. And it can take some weight off your mind: once something is written down, you do not have to keep rehearsing it to remember it.

What to include

The U.S. Department of Justice's equal employment guidance for its own staff suggests keeping a detailed written record of what happened, when it took place, the names of any witnesses, and how you responded. A practical same-day note follows that shape:

- **Date and time.**

- **Place.**
- **What the person said or did,** in their exact words if you remember them.
- **What you said or did.**
- **Who saw or heard it.**
- **Who you told, and when.**
- **Any messages,** saved as screenshots with the date and sender visible, taken before you block or delete anything.
- **How it affected you,** if you want to include it.

Stick to plain facts. "Said 'you'll regret ignoring me' and followed me to the door" is clearer than "was creepy." You can still write how you felt, as a separate line.

Here is an example of a note, using invented details:

> Thursday, 4:40 p.m. Café on the main street, window table. Customer at the next table asked for my number. I said "No thanks." They said "Come on, just one coffee." I said "No." They moved their chair closer and left a napkin with their number on my table. Two people at the next table looked over. I moved near the counter and told the barista at about 4:50. Felt shaky for an hour.

If you are not sure it "counts"

Many people hesitate to write anything down because they are not sure what happened was "serious enough." You do not need to decide that first. A record is just a record. If the behavior stops, the note simply sits in a drawer. If it continues, you will be glad you have it.

The same is true of reporting. The EEOC explains that whether workplace conduct crosses the legal line depends on the facts of each case, judged case by case. That is exactly why this book does not try to decide for you, and why the agency invites people to get in touch and discuss their situation. Venue managers, schools and employers also have their own rules, which can be broader than the law. Your job is not to judge your own case before anyone else hears it. Your job is to keep the details, so that someone who does have that role can.

Keeping it private

Keep the record somewhere only you control: a notebook at home, a notes app protected by a passcode, or an email to yourself on a personal account rather than a work or shared account. If you share a device, an account or a phone plan with the person involved, think carefully about where you store it, and consider asking an advocate for advice about safer options.

Do not use the record to confront anyone. And do not try to gather more evidence in ways that bring you back near the person. Your safety comes before any paperwork.

Where reporting routes begin

Reporting routes depend on where something happened. Here is a broad map.

Venues. A café, gym, shop, landlord or transit agency may be able to ban someone, change a schedule, check its own records, assign a different staff member, or simply note a pattern so the next report is taken more seriously.

School. A teacher, counselor, coach or the school office can start the school's own process. Students do not need to know the process in advance; a trusted adult can help find it.

Work. There is usually a supervisor, human resources, or a written complaint procedure. The EEOC encourages reporting to management early, before harassment escalates. It also says that retaliating against someone for complaining about discrimination, filing a charge or taking part in an investigation is prohibited under the laws it enforces.

Federal agency for workplace harassment. For harassment at work based on sex or another protected characteristic, the EEOC is the federal agency to know. You can contact it to discuss your situation before deciding anything. Its official pages, read on 2026-10-15, list a phone line at 1-800-669-4000, an ASL video phone at 1-844-234-5122, an online public portal, and field offices.

Police. For threats, stalking, assault, or any situation where you fear for your safety, you can report to your local police department. In the United States, if you are in immediate danger, call 911.

Deadlines matter

The EEOC's deadlines are strict, and they are a good reason to find out about your options early, even if you have not decided what to do. According to the EEOC's own page, read on 2026-10-15:

- A charge generally must be filed within **180 calendar days** of the discrimination.

- That deadline is **extended to 300 calendar days** where a state or local agency enforces a law that prohibits the same kind of discrimination.
- For **ongoing harassment**, the deadline is counted from the **most recent incident**, and the EEOC will look at earlier incidents too.
- **Federal employees and applicants** follow a different process and generally must contact their agency's EEO counselor within **45 days**.
- An **internal complaint** to HR or another grievance process generally **does not pause** the EEOC filing deadline.

These figures can change, and there are details and exceptions this book does not cover. Check the official page for the deadline in your situation, and if a deadline might matter, contact the EEOC early.

What this does not mean

Writing it down does not commit you to reporting. Choosing not to report does not mean it was not real or that you did something wrong. Reporting does not guarantee any particular outcome, and an outcome you dislike does not mean you should not have reported.

This chapter is not legal advice, and it makes no decision about whether any conduct is unlawful. Laws, deadlines and protections vary by place and situation. Check the official source for your jurisdiction, and consider talking with an advocate or a qualified attorney.

In practice

The open house. Tamsin, thirty-one, hosts a weekend open house for a home she is selling. Afterward, one visitor sends a text, then another, then several a day, even after she replies once, "Please don't contact me again." She stops replying. She takes a screenshot of each message with the date showing and keeps a short log in a notebook at home. She tells her manager, who arranges for a colleague to host her next open house with her. When one message mentions the street where she parked, she takes her log and screenshots to her local police department. Because of her log, she does not have to rebuild weeks of contact from memory while she is stressed.

The night shift. Marisol is fifty-two and cleans offices on a night shift. A worker from one of the companies in the building keeps making sexual comments when she empties the bins on his floor. She keeps a log in a notebook in her bag: date, time, floor, his words, who else was there. She tells her supervisor in writing. A few weeks pass and it keeps happening. She calls the EEOC to talk through her situation before deciding anything, and learns that because the harassment is ongoing, the deadline is counted from the most recent incident. She decides to file. Her notebook makes the conversation much easier.

Checklist

- I know what a same-day note includes: when, where, exact words, my response, witnesses, who I told.
- I screenshot messages, with date and sender visible, before blocking or deleting.
- I keep my record somewhere only I control.

- I do not use my record to confront anyone or gather evidence near the person.
- I know the broad reporting routes: venue, school, work, EEOC, police.
- I know EEOC deadlines are strict, and I will check the official page early if it might matter.
- I know writing it down does not commit me to reporting.

Key terms

- **Same-day note:** a short, factual record of an incident made as soon as you can after it happens.
- **Pattern:** repeated behavior over time, which a record can help show.
- **Charge:** a formal complaint of employment discrimination filed with the EEOC.
- **Retaliation:** punishing someone for complaining about discrimination or taking part in an investigation; prohibited under the laws the EEOC enforces.
- **EEO counselor:** the person federal employees contact first about discrimination at their agency.

Talk it through

1. Why do you think people often hesitate to write things down after harassment?
2. What could make a record feel useful rather than burdensome?
3. What would you want to know about a reporting route before deciding whether to use it?

Journal prompt

Write the headings you would use for a same-day note. Then describe, in general terms, where you would keep it so that only you could reach it.

Chapter 6. Recovery, support and never your fault

Harassment does not always end when the person walks away. It can follow you home, into your sleep, into the next time you walk into that café or open that app. This chapter is about what happens afterward: the reactions people have, the support that exists, and the most important idea in this book.

Reactions are normal

People describe all kinds of reactions after harassment. Shaky hands. Replaying the moment again and again. Anger that arrives hours later. Trouble sleeping. Avoiding a place or a route. Feeling numb. Feeling fine, and then suddenly not. Some people feel embarrassed for "letting it get to them," especially if they think it "wasn't that bad."

All of these are common reactions to an unwanted, intrusive experience. There is no correct way to feel, and no deadline for feeling better. You do not need to measure your reaction against anyone else's. If it bothered you, it bothered you, and that is reason enough to look after yourself.

It is never your fault

The person who harasses chooses that behavior. It is not caused by your clothes, your smile, your politeness, your age, your body, the time of day, being alone, answering a first question, freezing, laughing to get through it, staying, leaving, or not reporting.

Many people, and many girls especially, are taught from a young age to be agreeable, to smile, and to look after other people's feelings. Using those habits under pressure is not an invitation. It is what people do when they are trying to get through a hard moment safely.

Self-blame is very common, even among people who would never blame a friend. If it shows up, try one question: "What would I say to a friend if this had happened to them?" You may know the answer right away. Then say it to yourself, out loud if you can. It may feel strange. Say it anyway.

A settle-down plan

It helps to decide now, while you are calm, what you will do in the hour after something happens. Keep it to three small steps. For example:

1. Get somewhere you feel comfortable.
2. Drink some water and take a few slow breaths with long exhales.
3. Text or call one person who will listen without judging.

Other people add a walk, music, a shower, a familiar show, or writing the same-day note from Chapter 5. Some prefer to leave the note until tomorrow. Your plan is yours.

Your circle

Alongside your plan, think about the people around you. A helpful circle usually includes:

- **Someone who listens.** They do not need to fix anything.

- **Someone who helps with practical things.** A ride, company on a route, help writing an email.
- **Someone who knows the systems.** A supervisor, human resources contact, school counselor or advocate who understands how reporting works.

These can be the same person or different people. They can change over time.

Trained support

You can also talk to someone trained. The Office on Violence Against Women at the U.S. Department of Justice does not provide direct services itself, but its resource page, read on 2026-10-15, lists national hotlines that can connect people with local help:

- National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-4673
- National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233 (TTY 1-800-787-3224)
- StrongHearts Native Helpline: 1-844-762-8483
- Teen Dating Abuse Helpline: 1-866-331-9474 (TTY 1-866-331-8453)
- VictimConnect Resource Center: 1-855-484-2846

The same page notes that state and Tribal coalitions can also connect people with local service providers.

For emotional distress of any kind, the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline says it is for everyone, including people who just need someone to talk to. You can call or text 988 or chat online. Its page describes conversations as free and confidential, available 24/7, and you can reach out for a friend or loved one as well as for yourself.

If you are in immediate danger in the United States, call 911.

Numbers and services can change. Check the official pages listed in the Sources section.

Getting a place back

Recovery can also mean getting a place back. If something happened at your regular café, bus route, gym or library, you get to decide whether and how to return. Some people go back the next day because it matters to them. Others go with a friend for a while, change the time they go, sit nearer the counter, or ask staff to let them know if the person shows up again. Some decide not to go back, and that is a reasonable choice too.

Small changes are not hiding. They are you adjusting your routine on your own terms, and you can change them again whenever you feel ready.

When it keeps happening

Recovery is harder when the harassment has not stopped: the coworker is still down the hall, the messages still arrive, the person still uses your bus stop. You do not have to wait for it to end before you deserve care. In that situation, support often means two things at once: looking after how you feel today, and getting help to change the situation. Advocates reached through the hotlines above can help you think through both, including safer routines and who to tell. Your same-day notes (Chapter 5) will show the pattern if you decide to report. Planning routines around an ongoing concern is a related topic of its own. And it is still not your fault, however long it has gone on, and whether or not you have said anything yet.

If someone confides in you

If someone tells you about harassment, the most helpful things are simple:

- **Believe them.** "Thank you for telling me."
- **Listen.** Let them tell it their way, in their own time.
- **Place the blame where it belongs.** "It wasn't your fault."
- **Let them choose.** "What would help right now?"

Try to avoid questions that start with "Why didn't you…?", even if you mean them as problem-solving. Afterward, they tend to land as blame. Practical ideas can come later, if the person wants them.

What this does not mean

This chapter is not therapy, medical care or a diagnosis. If your reactions are intense, last a long time, or get in the way of daily life, talking with a counselor, doctor or advocate can help. Reaching out is a sign of care, not weakness.

You do not have to report to deserve support. You do not have to forgive anyone. You do not have to "get over it" on a schedule. And if you would choose differently next time, that is learning, not blame. Whatever you did in the moment, you got through it, and the responsibility stays with the person who chose to harass.

In practice

The aunt. Keisha is fifteen. After a customer at a café kept pushing for her number, she comes home quiet and feels stupid for answering the first question. Her aunt notices and says, "Whatever happened, you're not in trouble." Later, Keisha tells her. Her

aunt listens without asking “Why didn’t you…?”, says it was not Keisha’s fault, and asks what would help. Together they write down what happened and decide to let the café manager know. Keisha still wants to go to that café. For now, she goes with a friend.

The bus stop. Ruth is sixty-six. A stranger at her usual bus stop made sexual comments and followed her onto the bus, until she moved to sit behind the driver. For weeks afterward she avoids that stop and takes a longer route. One night she cannot sleep and feels overwhelmed, so she texts 988 and talks with a counselor, who listens and helps her think about what might help. The next week she rides the old route with her neighbor. A month later she rides it alone, at a different time of day. She decides that is good enough for now, and it is.

Checklist

- I know my reactions are normal, and there is no deadline for feeling better.
- I know it is never my fault, whatever I did in the moment.
- I have a three-step settle-down plan.
- I can name, by role or relationship, the people in my circle.
- I know where to find national hotlines and 988, and to call 911 in immediate danger.
- I know I can return to a place on my own terms, or not at all.
- If someone confides in me, I will believe, listen, place the blame where it belongs and let them choose.

Key terms

- **Self-blame:** holding yourself responsible for someone else's harmful choice.
- **Settle-down plan:** three small steps, decided in advance, for the hour after something hard happens.
- **Circle of support:** the people who listen, help practically and know the systems.
- **Advocate:** a trained person who supports someone affected by harassment or violence and helps them understand their options.

Talk it through

1. Why do you think self-blame is so common, even among people who would never blame a friend?
2. What does good support from a friend look like? What gets in the way?
3. How can a community, such as a school, workplace or café, make it easier for people to recover and come back?

Journal prompt

Write your three-step settle-down plan. Then write the words you would want a friend to say to you after a hard moment, and say them to yourself.

Glossary

- **Advocate:** a trained person who supports someone affected by harassment or violence and helps them understand their options.
- **Ally:** anyone who helps by being present, making space, calling someone or walking with you.
- **Boundary:** a statement about what you will and will not accept, and what you will do next.
- **Boundary-testing:** treating someone's no as the start of a negotiation, through repeated or reshaped requests.
- **Charge:** a formal complaint of employment discrimination filed with the EEOC.
- **Circle of support:** the people who listen, help practically and know the systems.
- **Code word:** a word agreed in advance with someone you trust that signals you need a call or a pickup.
- **Course of conduct:** a pattern of repeated behavior directed at a specific person over time.
- **EEO counselor:** the person federal employees contact first about discrimination at their agency.
- **EEOC:** the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the federal agency that enforces laws against workplace discrimination, including harassment.
- **Escalation:** behavior that is getting closer, louder, more insistent or more personal.
- **Exit pair:** one short sentence combined with one move away from the situation.

- **Freeze response:** going blank, going along or being unable to act under sudden stress; a common and normal reaction.
- **Guilt label:** turning someone's no into a flaw in their character.
- **Non-employee harassment:** harassment at work by someone who is not on staff, such as a customer or client.
- **Pattern:** repeated behavior over time, which a record can help show.
- **Re-ask:** the same request returning in a new form after a no.
- **Repeat line:** using the same words each time a request returns.
- **Retaliation:** punishing someone for complaining about discrimination or taking part in an investigation.
- **Same-day note:** a short, factual record of an incident made as soon as you can after it happens.
- **Self-blame:** holding yourself responsible for someone else's harmful choice.
- **Settle-down plan:** three small steps, decided in advance, for the hour after something hard happens.
- **Shrink:** making a request sound so small that refusing seems unreasonable.
- **Softener:** an apology, a maybe or a reason added to a no; it often invites bargaining.
- **Staffed place:** a location where someone is working who can help.
- **Three-part ask:** a request that says what is happening, what you have done and what you need.
- **Unasked favor:** help you did not request, used to create a feeling of debt.

- **Unwelcome conduct:** behavior the person receiving it did not invite and does not want.

Where to go next

Finding qualified hands-on training

Reading and reflection build a foundation. Practicing out loud with real people builds confidence. If you would like hands-on practice, look for in-person or live online workshops on assertive communication, boundary-setting or personal safety offered through community centers, colleges, libraries, employers, unions, women's organizations or local victim service agencies.

Before signing up, it is reasonable to ask:

- Is the training trauma-informed? Can participants sit out any exercise without explaining why?
- Who are the instructors, and what is their background in this subject?
- Does the training focus on choices such as leaving and getting help, rather than only on confrontation?
- Is it accessible to people of different ages, bodies, abilities and languages?
- Does it avoid blaming people for what was done to them?

This course and book do not recommend any particular provider. They are an educational reading course with no saved completion, certification or qualification.

Official resources

- **Workplace harassment:** the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's pages on harassment, filing time limits and how to file a charge (see Sources).

- **Support and local services:** the Office on Violence Against Women's Resources for Victims and Survivors page lists national hotlines and state and Tribal coalitions.
- **Stalking:** the Office on Violence Against Women's stalking page explains the term and how to report.
- **Emotional distress:** the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, by call, text or chat.
- **Immediate danger:** in the United States, call 911.
- **School:** ask a teacher, counselor or the school office about the school's own reporting process.
- **Your jurisdiction:** laws and protections vary by state and locality. Check official state and local government sources for your area.

Related topics

- Exiting heated disagreements.
- Helping when you see someone else being harassed.
- Noticing your surroundings without assumptions.
- What stress does to attention and choices.
- Journeys, transit and parking.
- Privacy settings and what you share online.
- Planning routines around an ongoing concern.
- The practical steps after a more serious incident.

Sources

These official pages were read on 2026-10-15. They support limited factual statements in this book. All lessons, examples, cases and exercises are original RivalShot Academy writing.

- U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission — Harassment. https://www.eeoc.gov/harassment (checked 2026-10-15)
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