

# 'He just kept going'—why you might snap back, freeze or ignore street harassment

June 16 2023, by Bianca Fileborn

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

As someone who has spent the last decade researching sexual harassment and violence in public spaces, the question I'm commonly asked is: "What advice should I give my teenage daughter about what to do when she's harassed by men in public? "

This question is, of course, completely understandable. We all want our loved ones to feel safe when they're out in public.

Women and LGBTQ+ people [experience high levels of harassment](#) in public (though it is always important to remember gender-based violence is most likely to be perpetrated [at home by someone you know](#)). So there is a high likelihood this is something you or your loved ones will experience.

Street [harassment](#) is often not taken seriously as an issue. Many forms of this behavior are not against the law, meaning victims have limited options for reporting or seeking support. This can make it challenging to know what to do if you've been harassed.

While it's tempting to focus on what people can do to "stay safe" or respond effectively to harassers, this is ultimately the wrong question to ask.

## Shouting back

In my [recent research](#), I undertook in-depth interviews with 46 people about their experiences of harassment in [public spaces](#). Participants often discussed how they responded to harassers. These responses could take many forms.

Some participants described verbally challenging harassers, often by telling them to "fuck off" or shouting back at them.

Physical acts of resistance were also common—including making gestures and pulling faces at a harasser. One participant described "blowing a kiss" at a group of men who had shouted homophobic abuse at him. "Sarah" described fighting back:

"He just kept going. So there was a moment where he grabbed my arm [...] and then I just gave him a big slap at that moment."

Resistance also involved participants [refusing to limit](#) their lives and actions because of street harassment, perhaps by defiantly continuing to walk home at night or holding a partner's hand in public despite unwelcome comments.

## Reclaiming power

Challenging harassers could be an important strategy for some participants to reclaim a sense of power and disrupt the normalization of harassment. One participant reflected on how harassers ([mostly men](#)):

"Feel so comfortable staring you down, that I don't want to make them feel comfortable doing that. Sometimes I kind of like yell at them or make a gross face at them or give them the finger. Because it's not innocent and it's not innocuous."

Being silent or refusing to acknowledge an harassers' actions was also commonly raised as a form of resistance, as it denied harassers the satisfaction of a response. However, one participant reflected that while silence could be a safer option because "you don't get into any conflict with anyone", it also felt "like I'm getting rid of my power".

Some people find it takes [many years to realize](#) harassment is something that can be resisted, because it is often normalized as being "complimentary" or "flirtatious". As one participant said,

"Just having experienced it so many times that I've recognized the patterns and that it's not just, oh this man's just lonely and needs to talk. It's like, no that's predatory behavior and I can call it out."

Although some participants talked about acts of resistance as moments of "snapping" in anger, these responses could perhaps best be thought of as a slow build up of rage after years of encountering street harassment.

## Resistance and safety

There was often a delicate balancing act between resistance and maintaining a sense of safety. One older participant reflected on her life experiences of sexist and homophobic harassment, saying that while she tried to show defiance to harassers, she was also making "quick judgements [...] because I don't know if I'm going to be hit or not".

Resisting harassers involved significant mental, emotional and physical labor, with participants having to make rapid assessments of how safe they felt to respond. Some people described being "worn down" by years of experiencing harassment.

People said they'd often been in shock or felt unable to process what had happened in the moment. It often wasn't until hours after an incident they thought of the perfect retort. This could feel intensely frustrating.

While it's tempting to offer people advice on what they "should" do in the moment, the reality is it is not always safe to "shout back". It is also normal for people who have experienced sexual and other violence to experience automatic "fight, flight, freeze or fawn" [responses](#).

Focusing on how victims should respond reinforces the myth [victims are responsible](#) for preventing and managing the violence of others.

## What can we do?

So, what can you do if you're being or have been harassed? The short

answer is: do whatever you feel safe and able to do in the moment. There is no "correct" response.

For some people, it's helpful to [talk to a trusted friend](#) or to [share experiences](#) through activist platforms like [Right to Be](#) (formally Hollaback!). This can help people recognize they are not alone in their experiences and street harassment is a [systemic issue](#) interconnected with other forms of gendered violence.

[Self-care strategies](#) including deep breathing, "grounding", exercising or resting can help.

And we need to shift the focus to how we, as a community, can best support people who've experienced harassment. This might include upskilling [community members](#) to [safely intervene as bystanders](#) and to [respond appropriately to disclosures](#). If someone does share their experience of public harassment with you, it is important to express belief and validation—and to ask them what support they need.

We need to collectively challenge the idea street harassment is "normal" or "not a big deal", ensuring this behavior is addressed as part of our efforts to prevent gender-based (and other) violence. This places the focus where it belongs: on the actions of harassers and the [structural drivers](#) of their behavior.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: 'He just kept going'—why you might snap back, freeze or ignore street harassment (2023, June 16) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-06-goingwhy-snap->

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