



Harassment on board: A trauma-informed approach

Our Members sometimes face difficult situations involving their crew – sexual assault cases being one of the most challenging examples. While such incidents may be borderline for insurance coverage, we may still get involved to provide support and advice. A key question is whether the risk of long-term after-effects can be reduced by the way the situation is handled.

Published Invalid Date Invalid Date NaN

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Lately, several of our Members have reached out regarding specific cases or for more general guidance on the topic, as the updated STCW Code from 1 January 2026 [will include requirements of training on harassment and bullying](#). This training must include a basic understanding of harassment, its consequences and a trauma-informed approach.

Having strong policies and procedures in place that clearly state [zero tolerance for harassment is important](#). However, it is not enough. We all want a safe and inclusive working environment but getting there takes time. This is where mentalisation – increasing the ability to take another person's perspective and reflecting on how you yourself are perceived – can be helpful.

To evoke the reader's empathy, we use a fictional case in this article, inspired by real situations we have encountered. And while our example focuses on sexual assault against a woman, we have also seen assaults against male seafarers. Similar response approaches also apply to other types of trauma, like violence, bullying and harassment, or severe accidents or casualties.

An assault happens on board

Laura is a young female cadet working on board a tanker. She is the only woman on board and is often subject to sexualized jokes and remarks from her colleagues, including the chief officer, Kevin. Due to her junior status and cultural background, there is a significant power distance, and she feels insecure and unable to speak up. She is also worried that someone might actually act on their remarks. As a result, she locks her cabin door and blocks it with furniture every night.

Kevin is attracted to Laura and thinks he is doing a great job flirting with her. His intention is to compliment her with his remarks and to show that he likes her. He interprets Laura's silence and politeness as a sign that she welcomes his attention.

One day, Laura opens the cabin door to go out for supper when coincidentally, Kevin is passing by. Laura gets so scared when she sees him that she immediately freezes. Kevin interprets her standing in the doorway as an invitation. He enters her cabin and sexually assaults her. Laura does nothing to protest, she is unable to move or resist. Her silence and immobility is, by Kevin, considered as consent.

Laura does not file a complaint after the incident and mostly blames herself for the assault. Soon after the incident, Laura starts to experience insomnia followed by stomach aches. She signs off from the vessel and during the subsequent contract, she has to sign off again due to severe migraines. She tries to do another contract and again needs to sign off due to chest pains and a suspected heart attack. After this, Laura is unable to continue working at sea.

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What is trauma?

Trauma occurs when a person is exposed to an extremely stressful, frightening, or distressing event that overwhelms their ability to cope. Such experiences are highly individual – what traumatizes one person may not affect another in the same way. Trauma can result from a single severe incident or from an accumulation of smaller harmful events over time, such as ongoing harassment or bullying.

When someone experiences trauma, their brain's emotional center (the limbic system) takes over, triggering survival responses. There are different responses, and most familiar is the 'fight or flight' response. If you ask people how they would react in a threatening situation, they would likely expect themselves to fight back or to run away. But in reality, "freezing" or "flopping" are more common responses.

The "freeze" response involves sudden immobility – muscles tense, breathing stills, and you become physically and emotionally paralyzed. This reaction can occur when escape seems impossible, or resistance feels unsafe. With "flopping", the body collapses or becomes limp, sometimes described as dissociative, with a sense of numbness or detachment from reality. Both responses are survival mechanisms, not conscious choices, and can be [misinterpreted by others as just passivity or even consent](#).

Freezing or flopping can lead to feelings of guilt and shame, as many survivors blame themselves for not reacting differently. These feelings often lead to hiding or suppressive behaviour and might hinder people from seeking help. The culture surrounding the survivor can also have an impact – people questioning how the survivor was dressed before the assault, or cultures believing that women are to be blamed for being assaulted. If Laura opens up to a colleague to seek support, and the colleague asks; "were you flirting with him?" or "are you sure you didn't like it a little since you didn't fight back"? – Laura's feelings of shame and guilt could be overwhelming. Understanding the common trauma reactions is therefore paramount.

When the threat is over, the aftereffects of trauma start. Reactions can include confusion, memory gaps, denial, anxiety, mood swings, headaches, fatigue and trouble sleeping. All normal responses, that can subside with time. If unaddressed, the effects may persist and develop into post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety and substance abuse. This kind of stress can weaken the immune system, increasing the risk of illnesses, including [more severe conditions like heart disease or autoimmune diseases](#).

The small things

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Establishing zero tolerance against harassment is not enough. We also need to understand how culture – both at the workplace and in a wider sense – can influence behaviours which can increase the risk of harassment or an assault.

Before the assault happened, Laura was subject to sexist jokes and remarks. For some, this jargon can be a way to show disapproval of women at sea; for others, it can be a way of ‘bonding’ and connecting. Acceptance for sexist jokes and remarks can contribute to defining a “vessel culture” that leads to crew members thinking that “this is ok” even if they might not agree personally. Being young and new, it can be difficult to speak up about this and face the risk of rejection from the group.

However, data show that sexist humour is not harmless – it can shape attitudes, reduce empathy, and lower resistance to harassment, as highlighted in the article ["It's just a joke, right?"](#). Indirectly, it can reinforce stereotypes, trivialize women's experiences, and create environments where silence might be misinterpreted as consent. Bystanders have a role in influencing this culture. A silent bystander allows it to continue. Speaking up can trigger reflection and instigate change.

Other impacting factors include the use of alcohol or other drugs. Under influence you are less sensitive to others' emotions and reactions, and setting your own boundaries is also more difficult. Stress and fatigue might have similar effects.

What culture and beliefs influenced on Kevin's actions we can only guess. We don't know if he is misogynistic and downplays Laura's suffering or if he is a “nice guy” that simply thought Laura's silence was expected submissive behaviour. Either way, Laura's perception of him and his behaviour, remains the same. And the same goes for the impact on her health and wellbeing.

Silence, lack of resistance, or passive responses, particularly in situations involving fear, coercion, or power imbalance, do not constitute consent. In most jurisdictions, and certainly under best ethical practices, engaging in sexual activity without clear, affirmative consent can amount to sexual assault or rape. The best way to ensure someone is consenting? Ask clearly, and repeatedly!

How do we respond to trauma?

[Research indicates](#) that people can overcome traumatic experiences with the right support and taking the trauma-informed approach might increase the probability of healing. Having a trauma-informed approach means:

- **recognising** the widespread impact of trauma
- **knowing** the signs and symptoms of trauma
- **integrating** knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices
- **taking steps** to avoid contributing to additional harm (re-traumatisation).

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Re-traumatization refers to when an individual experiences aspects of a traumatic event again, whether consciously or unconsciously. This may be triggered by stressors similar to those in the original situation, such as specific smells, environments, lighting, visual cues, memories, or new relationships resembling past trauma.

Naturally, an investigation might in itself be re-traumatizing. A trauma-informed investigator will therefore keep this in mind and try to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the survivor, allowing for better access to memories and better chances of communicating them. Talking about the trauma should only be done with trained personnel. Everyone can be empathetic and supportive but never ask a person to share details about the trauma, unless you are professionally trained in trauma care. Trauma-informed investigators may not be available everywhere, but asking for this competence might increase the supply over time.

Everything that is being done after a trauma should be done in collaboration with the survivor, ensuring they remain in control and are given a choice whenever possible. This means that reporting the assault is the survivor's choice. Before starting a criminal investigation, the survivor needs to know what it means for him/her, so the choice is informed. Accepting healthcare is also a choice. Informing the survivor that freezing or flopping are common reactions might decrease the shame, making it easier to accept help. Peer support can also be helpful, increasing the feeling of empowerment.

Finally, the survivor's safety is crucial – ensuring he or she is physically safe from new assaults and re-traumatization. With reference to our case, this can mean ensuring that Laura does not risk meeting Kevin again at work, not having to stay in the same cabin, ensuring she has company from someone she trusts etc. When supporting Laura, it is also important to be mindful of her background and cultural context. Had Laura been Jay or Vladimir the needs might have been very different.

At Gard, we are always ready to assist our Members and clients with challenging cases. We have inhouse expertise and experience on the matter, as well as an extensive network of local correspondents and service providers who might be able to support.

For further information:

[Trauma-informed care: Building a culture of strength](#)

[Sexual Assault Support | Safer Waves](#)

[SASH Best Practices Guide | Free Downloads](#)

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[Survivors Self Help Guide - Survivors Network.](#)

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