

# Handling Sensitive Topics And Issues



## Before Screening *The Leadership*

Prior to screening *The Leadership* and discussing sex discrimination and sexual harrassment or assault and its impacts, it is important to note that gender issues are widespread and sex discrimination and sexual harrassment or assault also affects some men and transgender or intersex individuals. It is also important to be mindful that some people will have a close and personal experience of discrimination and harrassment, sexual abuse or sexual assault. For this reason it is critical to create and maintain a safe space for participants.

Talking about gender and women's issues can often involves addressing sensitive or controversial issues. Gender issues are often linked to deeply embedded social and religious beliefs and values, and as such may evoke strong opinions or raise challenging questions that have no easy answers. It is important to handle these issues without reinforcing stereotypes, increasing confusion or raising tension between students.

By helping to create an environment where opinions and perspectives are respected, students are encouraged to actively take part in advancing the rights of others, within the classroom and beyond. By helping to create an environment where students are encouraged to act with empathy and listen actively, students can actively demonstrate increasing respect and empathy towards others.

When using teaching and learning activities from this resource, also be mindful of the different learning abilities, maturity levels and personal backgrounds of your students.

**Remember to take care of yourself, too! You may wish to journal about your experiences, debrief with trusted colleagues, call a helpline for a professional debrief, engage in activities you enjoy, or seek support.**

We recommend these steps for creating a safe environment:

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1. Establishing a safe space for participants – at the commencement:
  - Acknowledge that thinking and talking about trauma can be difficult and ask participants to do what they need to take care of themselves (this may include taking time out)
  - Suggest that participants can speak to the teacher or another trusted adult if they find the content and/or process difficult at any point
  - Make the point that we want everyone to have a safe learning environment
  - Given the prevalence of trauma a percentage of students or their family or friends will have trauma histories
  - Suggest to participants that this lesson time is not the optimal space for sharing details of personal stories both for the safety of themselves and others.
2. Set up some group rules by establishing a mutually agreed list of sharing guidelines, displaying them in a highly visible place, and encouraging the class to kindly remind each other of the guidelines. These guidelines could include:
  - Own your ideas by using “I think” rather than “you should”
  - Respect each other by remembering that each person has their own beliefs and values and their own world views, experiences and opinions
  - Each person has a right to contribute their ideas so listen politely
  - Be brave in sharing your ideas, experiences and opinions
  - Consider the privacy of your classmates and appreciate that everyone has the right to uphold their privacy
  - Share feedback in a way that is considerate and positive: remember to be kind, helpful and specific when providing feedback.
3. To support cultural safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, acknowledge country and the Traditional Owners of the land on which you are meeting.
4. Provide a written Trigger Warning e.g. *The Leadership* contains occasional course language and presents themes related to bullying, sex discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual assault. Efforts should be made to monitor for triggers. Take note of students who seem to be experiencing intense discomfort or emotions during and after these lessons. In cases where students require counselling or support, refer them privately to the school counsellor or one of the organisations listed on the next page.
5. In respecting those with personal experiences related to the content, it is important to be consistent with language and reflections. In talking about survivors' experiences, it is vital to not pathologize, judge, 'other', or 'them' people who are trauma or abuse survivors.
6. Provide a written list of Specialist Support Services. The following services provide support, advice, and can debrief professionals working in responding to child abuse, sexual assault, domestic and family violence and providing crisis support. You might like to print out the following page:

# If You Need Help...

If you have experienced bullying, discrimination, harassment, sexual harassment or abuse, sometimes it can take time to process and fully comprehend what's happened. If it doesn't feel right, it can be worth talking through your experience with someone you trust. You can reach out to your friends, but it's important that you're getting the correct information and advice.

Speak to a parent/guardian, teacher, other trusted adult or make an appointment with the school counsellor.

Our school's best wellbeing/counselling contact is: \_\_\_\_\_

Alternatively, you could contact one of the following organisations:

## **Kids Helpline**

Kids Helpline provides 24 hours a day, 7 days a week phone and online counselling service for Australian children and young people aged between 5 and 25 years.

Website: <http://www.kidshelp.com.au/>

Phone: 1800 551 800

## **Headspace**

The National Youth Mental Health Foundation provides information and advice for young people going through difficulties through their Headspace centres and online and telephone support services

Website: <https://www.eheadspace.org.au/>

Phone: 1800 650 890

## **Lifeline**

Lifeline provides 24-hours a day, 7 days a week crisis support and suicide prevention services.

Website: <https://www.lifeline.org.au/Home>

Phone: 13 11 14

## **1800RESPECT**

1800RESPECT is a national counselling helpline that offers support and information around domestic violence and sexual assault 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Website: <https://www.1800respect.org.au/>

Phone: 1800 737 732.

## **Blue Knot Foundation**

Blue Knot Foundation is a national specialist service which provides over-the-phone counselling, information and support for adult survivors of childhood trauma and abuse. Their Helpline operates Monday – Sunday 9am to 5pm.

Website: <https://www.blueknot.org.au/>

Phone: 1300 657 380.

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## A Guide To Discussions

Common Participant Reactions	Reason this Happens	Suggested Strategies
<p>Participants may become distracted and/or disengaged.</p>	<p>These are 'normal' responses to working with complex content, and are to be expected.</p>	<p>You may wish to normalise this with a statement such as: "As we explore this content together, we are going to be talking about sex discrimination and sexual harassment. None of these events should happen to anyone, but they do. You may need to take a break at times as you may find this process and the content upsetting or concerning. This is completely understandable. It's also normal to become distracted and disengaged. You might find you want to leave the room, or check your phone. All of that is okay. Try to notice if and when you do become upset, disengaged or distracted, and do what you need to take good care of yourself."</p>
<p>Participants may want "to do" things to "fix" the problem.</p>	<p>This is another normal response to working with complex content.</p>	<p>Strategies around this could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledging that people may feel this way</li> <li>• Providing participants with a relevant activity</li> <li>• Validating the value of engaging in a learning and reflective process such as the session, in its own right.</li> </ul>

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Common Participant Reactions	Reason this Happens	Suggested Strategies
<p>Participants might make inappropriate or derogatory comments about the people featured in <i>The Leadership</i>, survivors or other people in general, including making generalisations about a particular group.</p>	<p>Sometimes when participants are distancing themselves from the content, and processing it, they may respond like this. People who have their own experience of discrimination, harrassment or abuse might be additionally triggered at times. Others might make a comment without realising that it is derogatory.</p>	<p>You may wish to acknowledge the statement but not validate it. For example you could say:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “That is certainly an interesting point” or “That is an alternative perspective.” If the comment is clearly derogatory, gently suggest another way by saying something like: “It is important for everyone here to feel safe. Using words which either intentionally or unintentionally put someone down can be invalidating. Another way is to...” It is also important to bring the group back to a constructive discussion to help restore safety for all.</li> <li>• As an educator (and if the comment is not clearly derogatory) it might be preferable to not respond directly but rather say: “What do we all think about this idea...?”</li> <li>• If you felt it was appropriate to respond to the comment more directly, you might say:</li> <li>• “A different perspective is to consider....”</li> </ul>

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Common Participant Reactions	Reason this Happens	Suggested Strategies
<p>Participants may speak about their own experiences.</p>	<p>It has often been a concern that talking about discrimination, harrasment and sexual assault or abuse provides a forum in which to reveal personal experiences. In an educational environment and not a therapeutic one, the safety of the person disclosing and those in the group is a priority at all times. Understandably many educators don't feel equipped to hold the space in which a person is disclosing, and may be concerned about students' safety when someone shares - both for that person and the group.</p>	<p>An introductory containment statement such as this may be helpful:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "In acknowledging that some people in any room may have a personal experience of sex discrimination or sexual harassment, abuse or assault, including in this room, I want to tell you that—at no point—will I be asking you to share your personal experiences. If it sounds as though I have asked a question along those lines, it was not intended in that way. Everyone's personal experiences are very important. However in this forum we can't give you and your personal story the time and space it deserves."</li> </ul> <p>Don't cut them short; however discourage a focus on distressing detail (e.g., the specifics of the abuse or trauma):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thank them for sharing their personal expertise with you.</li> <li>• Ask if they are feeling supported and how they might best feel supported.</li> <li>• Refer them to support service.</li> </ul>

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<p>Participants may speak about their own experiences.</p>	<p>Participants may be concerned that they will be expected to discuss their own experiences, and this may make them less likely to participate in discussions or could be distressing for them.</p>	<p>It is important to be consistent and not ask participants to disclose their own experiences.</p> <p>If a participant does disclose in the group:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Thank you for sharing your personal experience with us.” At an opportune time, perhaps check in with the participant, thank them again for their contribution, and check if there is any further support they would like.</li> <li>• Refer them to the support services if they would like you to. Reassure the person that different people access support services at different times in their lives.</li> </ul> <p>If a participant does disclose to you directly (without the group present):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen to what they have to say without distraction.</li> <li>• Take a non-judgmental attitude; validate the person.</li> <li>• Do what you can to make them feel as safe as possible.</li> </ul>

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As the session ends, the general “feeling” in the room might be flat.	Given the content, it is expected that participants may feel flat. It may be a display of their empathy.	Acknowledging the empathy that is in the room may be validating and empowering. If you are concerned that focusing on sex discrimination, harassment or sexual assault might negatively impact students’ moods in general, you may wish to introduce an activity which, fosters hope and possibility without negating the existing feelings. We have designed our lessons with this in mind.
Lack of containment at the end of the session.	Given the nature of the content, this is another ‘normal’ response.	At the close of each lesson, you may wish to conduct a quick group check-in, and ask students how they are feeling whilst validating their feelings. If it is a larger group, they might do this in pairs. You may also ask students to write a sentence about how they are feeling (without asking them to share). This is another containment strategy. Completing the lesson content in full is strongly advised, but if you have to interrupt the content due to scheduling, plan a suitable containment activity for the end of each session.

Cool Australia acknowledge the hard work of [Blue Knot Foundation](#) in the creation of much of this [content](#) for the [Ghosthunter](#) film, which we have adapted for this project.