

Dealing with harassment on the Internet

The Internet has forever changed the way we communicate, share, work, learn, and play. It has quickened productivity, expanded global commerce, and enabled new opportunities for social interaction. It has helped strengthen the bonds of societies, and ushered in new communities, friendships, and connections.

Like the physical world, however, the online world is not without its challenges and concerns. Bad actors and risks persist, and negative online experiences can have real consequences: damaged reputations, lost job opportunities, identity theft, a threatened sense of well-being, or endangered physical safety. In some tragic instances, online harassment can even lead to suicide.

What is online harassment?

The range of information and expression online is vast. What is considered offensive or dangerous for some people or communities may ring as truth for someone else. However, when hateful speech online is directed at someone based simply on who they are—their religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, or race—there is no question that constitutes harassment.

Harassment can take many forms on the Internet, and is often committed by someone's ex-romantic partner, a disgruntled acquaintance or co-worker, or an online gaming adversary. Harassers may also be "trolls" who simply enjoy being mean and disruptive. A person can be harassed through taunting messages and name-calling, threats, vicious comments, or the distribution of personally identifiable information like home address, phone number, or government ID number. Women in particular may be subjected to "revenge porn"—the malicious online distribution of sexually intimate images without their permission—a form of emotional abuse and a digital extension of sexual violence. In online stalking (a crime in many places), an attacker obsessively and often anonymously harasses someone, using email, IM, or text messages. Attackers can go even beyond this level of activity and engage in dangerous behavior such as "SWATTING" [contacting authorities and

making false claims about an in-progress crime, typically at someone's house, thus triggering the need for a S.W.A.T. (Special Weapons and Tactics) Team response].

Microsoft has a long-standing commitment to help protect people online. For example, we respect freedom of expression, but take measures to remove illegal content; we enforce our terms of use and code of conduct against inappropriate actors in our online communities; and we seek to eliminate illegitimate commerce from our services.

But, what can *you* do if you're harassed on the Internet?

What you can do if you are harassed online

Consider seriously any continued online harassment. Take steps to fight it quickly and decisively. And remember that nobody deserves to be harassed.

File a report with local authorities

If you feel unsafe or threatened, or that you (or your child) are *physically* at risk, call the police at once.

Take the high road

- Ignore the negative post. Sometimes a person is just being belligerent and, when ignored, will stop.
- Or, you can ask the person to stop. State clearly once, and only once, that you want them to stop. Save your message exactly as you sent it, and don't respond further.
- Delete posted content. If negative or hostile comments or private images of you are posted to your social media page, your blog, or another site you control, delete them.
- Block the harasser on your phone or in email. Remove him or her as a friend on social networks. Change your privacy settings and disable comments on social media.

Ask for help from the online service

- Ask the website to take action against the harasser. For example, if it is on a Microsoft service, contact us at www.microsoft.com/reportabuse.
- If images have been posted without your consent:
 - Locate and take a screen capture of every place you can.
 - Find the photos or videos online, and note the web addresses (URLs) of the sites.
 - Contact the websites hosting the images and ask them to take them down. In the case of search engines, ask them to remove the images from search results. (Because it is illegal in many places to publish sexually explicit images of someone without their permission, this is particularly important for building a legal case.)
 - For Microsoft services, use this form: **Report Content to Microsoft**. (If a site charges a fee, don't pay it; instead approach one of the services suggested in Helpful Information.)

Seek support

- You don't need to face harassment alone. Talk with family members and friends, join a victim advocacy or online support group, maybe engage a professional.

- Get legal advice; depending on where you live, you may be able to pursue civil or criminal legal action against the person who is harassing you, and some firms offer *pro bono* assistance to victims.

Take control of your search results.

Research shows that most people never scroll past the first page of search results. Use that to your advantage, and bury any questionable content. Publish positive, accurate information—as much as you can—to control what comes up when someone searches your name. This can take time. (You might also consider using a commercial service to help you restore your reputation.)

How you can help a young person involved in online bullying

In addition to the actions above, here are some specific suggestions to help young people involved in bullying, including unwanted sexting and hate-speech attacks.

Get the full story.

Listen carefully and take it seriously. It may not be simple—the child or teen may be the target of bullying, or may be the one doing the bullying (or both). Recognize, too, that kids may be reluctant to talk about it.

Together, make a plan.

Ask what you can do to help, and make the child's or teen's answers the basis of the plan.

Discuss what each of you will do.

For kids being bullied online: Don't blame them (even if they started it)—no one deserves to be bullied. Advise kids not to respond or retaliate. (Do save the material in case authorities need it.)

For kids bullying someone online:

- Try to understand the source of the behavior. (But, don't let reasons become excuses.) Then be supportive—it's the behavior, not the kid, that is at the heart of the problem.
- Discuss how the child or teen can make amends, like an apology or a good deed for the person bullied.

Helpful Information

[Take Charge of Your Online Reputation](#) fact sheet

[Teach kids how to identify misinformation and hate on the Internet](#)

[Cyber Civil Rights Initiative](#) provides emotional support, technical advice, and information to current victims of online abuse

[Without My Consent](#) is dedicated to combating online harassment

[Reputation.com](#) and [DMCA Defender](#) are commercial services that can help you take down images and remove your name from search engine listings. DMCA Defender will remove unauthorized images of minors for free.