Unwanted Attention
STRATEGIES FOR RESILIENCE

Harassment, in the Peace Corps context, has several definitions. It is a continuum of unwanted attention that ranges from mildly annoying to threatening or offensive. When Volunteers talk about harassment, they are generally referring to unwanted attention that has reached a level to where it is causing them some degree of emotional distress. This attention, while distressing, is an unavoidable part of many Volunteers’ service. The Peace Corps has a stronger definition of workplace harassment, which is a reportable incident.¹³

UNWANTED ATTENTION AND PERSONAL RESILIENCY

Volunteers quickly find that people are naturally curious about them. Being the focus of attention is a fundamental part of Peace Corps life. Often the cultural differences that Volunteers present—hairstyle, dressing differently, or speaking with an accent—can attract unwanted attention and make them feel like they are in a fishbowl. This attention is usually harmless and more motivated by curiosity than anything else. Some Volunteers may experience it in a positive way and enjoy the attention. Others may not. It depends on the person and the situation. Unwanted attention, in general, can be mentally draining for many Volunteers.”

When Volunteers talk about harassment, they are generally referring to unwanted attention that has reached a level where it is causing emotional distress.

This is the definition of harassment used in this section. There are, however, several definitions of harassment, including criminal ones. These definitions all reflect a continuum of unwanted behavior that ranges from mildly annoying to threatening. When harassment involves being threatened with physical harm, being aggressively touched, or sexual contact, it is a crime. For information on harassment in the workplace as a reportable crime, see the section on harassment later in this chapter.

Intense or prolonged unwanted attention affects Volunteers in numerous ways. Everyone handles unwanted attention differently. There is no single best way to deal with it, but you can develop a variety of personal coping mechanisms and strategies. Remember that resiliency is as much a part of the Volunteer experience as unwanted attention.

Unwanted attention is not stalking. Stalking is conduct directed at a specific Volunteer that would cause a reasonable person to either fear for their safety or suffer substantial emotional distress. If you feel that unwanted attention from a certain individual or group of individuals is stalking, notify your SSM immediately.

Some things to keep in mind:

- **Different concepts of privacy and personal space.**
  Your community likely has a different concept of personal space than you do as an American. This can manifest itself in a variety of ways, like people sitting close to you or touching you.

- **People are genuinely curious about you and express this in different ways than you are accustomed to.**
  For many people in your community, especially the children, you may be the first foreigner they have been in close contact with. They may show their curiosity about you in possibly uncomfortable ways, such as touching you or staring at you.

---

PEER TO PEER

YOUR IDENTITY AND EXPERIENCE

“It’s important to note that you may identify yourself one way, but once you arrive in your country of service, HCNs may view you another way. This can be a great learning opportunity for you. Begin to think about your identity, how you perceive yourself, and how you want to be seen as you are going through your service. Volunteers have such different experiences during service, and something that you face every day may not cross the mind of even your closest neighbor.”
• Different concepts of racism and ethnicity. Your host community likely views racism quite differently than you do. If community members refer to you in racial terms or make comments about your ethnicity, it may not be a sign of disrespect on their part, although it may affect you negatively.

• During site identification and development, staff members educate your community and counterparts about the mission of the Peace Corps, and introduce them to American expectations. If you experience disturbing levels of unwanted attention in your community, ask Peace Corps staff to help you talk to your community members about it.

• A common form of unwanted attention is people asking you for money. Because you are a foreigner, most people will assume that you have more money than they do, so they may ask you for a gift or loan. Requests like this are usually not personal, but merely a reflection of peoples’ belief that you are wealthy.

• How you choose to deal with them depends on your personality and the situation.

• People want to add you on social media platforms. As discussed in a previous chapter, it may be a good idea to wait until you leave service to accept friend requests from community members. This may limit your exposure to potentially unwanted attention.

• It is reasonable to want to get away. Use leave days to get away from site if you are feeling stressed. Visit a friend, take a trip, go back to the United States for a couple of weeks. Whatever you need to do, make sure you have your time off approved by staff first.

• Let staff know. If the stress of unwanted attention is getting to you and you feel the need to get away frequently, inform Peace Corps staff.

• Take an active role. Set the boundaries of what you are comfortable with, and let your community members know that certain behaviors are upsetting to you.

---

**DIVERSITY NOTE**

**EXPECTATIONS**

Although many Volunteers are racial or ethnic minorities in their countries of service, others are not. This may lead to different, and perhaps unexpected, challenges. HCNs may have different expectations of Volunteers who appear to be part of the community’s racial or ethnic majority than those who are not.

These expectations may include thinking that you are already fluent in the local language, or that you are familiar with or practice local customs, or that you will follow local gender norms, including being more welcoming of sexual advances.

If this is a problem at site, Peace Corps staff can help you manage your community’s expectations.

---

**PEER TO PEER**

**DIVERSITY**

"I began by introducing myself [to my community], sharing the little tidbits about myself that my language instructor directly translated for me to memorize. Everything was running flawlessly. Then, I heard someone in the back of the place say, "Ohhh, she's a black American!" As if it weren't obvious enough. Soon it became a daily conversation with my community members. We would talk about the differences and similarities of being black in America vs. in Ghana. For me, living in Ghana was an opportunity to examine my cultural identity and share with my community."
STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH UNWANTED ATTENTION

Strategies for coping with unwanted attention vary among Volunteers and among situations. However, there are three general approaches you can take, as illustrated in the graphic below. The effectiveness of these approaches varies depending on the context. Rather than being your only options, use them to think up strategies that are effective for your specific context.

### Example responses to unwanted attention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unwanted Attention</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Hey American/foreigner/white person!&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;(Insert local greeting here)&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Come eat with us&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;You are so polite! Thank you, but I already ate.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Come buy this!&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;But I do not have any money!&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Be my girlfriend/boyfriend/spouse!&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I am already engaged!&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Three possible approaches for dealing with unwanted attention

- **Passive/Avoidant**
  - Taking no action
  - Remaining silent
  - Changing your routine or route

- **Assertive**
  - Standing up for yourself while respecting the other person
  - Respecting yourself as well as the other person
  - Being firm and clear without being rude or threatening

- **Aggressive/Attacking**
  - Expressing yourself in belligerent, hostile, or rude manner
  - Putting yourself or your rights first at someone else's expense
  - Responding in a culturally insensitive manner

---

**CRITICAL THINKING**

- Which of these strategies are culturally appropriate?
- What other strategies might you add?
- Are there other strategies that Volunteers have shared?
Volunteers want to avoid being aggressive at all costs, except in extreme cases when their personal safety is at risk. Below are some additional strategies for coping with unwanted attention.

- **Dress appropriately.** Keep in mind what is culturally appropriate.
- **Maintain your composure.** Try to remain calm even if you feel upset. Showing hostility may provoke confrontation. It is best to remove yourself from a situation if you feel that you are losing control.
- **Ignore the person who is harassing you.** Many Americans are used to engaging with someone in order to be polite. But sometimes it is best to ignore the person who is bothering you.
- **Tell your host family, counterparts, friends, and work partners that certain types of behavior bother you, and they will likely help you deal with it.** Many HCNs do not realize that Americans are more sensitive than they are to certain types of comments, especially racial ones. These situations can be great opportunities for cross-cultural exchange.
- **Be assertive.** Always walk with confidence and purpose. Hold your head high and carry yourself as a professional who deserves respect.
- **Nod (to acknowledge) or say “Hi” in the local language, and keep walking.** Simply recognizing the person can help ward off unwanted attention. Many times an inappropriate comment is an effort to get attention. But sometimes it invites continuing interaction.

- **Pretend that you heard something else.** “I agree, it has been really great weather recently. Have a nice day, bye!”
- **Use humor to deflect whatever is being said to you.** For example, if you are told that you would make a good lover, reply that your spouse is sure to agree. Keep walking. This may not work with a persistent person, so try different strategies as needed.
- **Be polite but firm.** It is quite normal to stand your ground. “I am offended by your comment. Please do not address me in that manner.”
- **Avoid saying, “next time.”** If you make statements that sound like promises, the person may try to hold you to it.
- **If harassed by a group of children.** Introduce yourself in the local language, and make them introduce themselves. This usually makes you less “other” to them and may well make you some great friends.
- **Avoid escalating the situation.** Raising your voice, forcefully removing yourself from the situation, or confronting someone should be avoided at all costs unless you feel like your personal safety, or that of another Volunteer, is at risk.

## HARASSMENT

The Peace Corps defines harassment, including sexual harassment, as an activity that creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment.

The Peace Corps is committed to maintaining high standards of conduct in the workplace and for Volunteer service overseas. Therefore, all offensive conduct is prohibited in Peace Corps workplaces with respect to Peace Corps staff.

---

### PEER TO PEER

### WHEN TO JOKE AND WHEN NOT TO

“When people would ask me to buy something, or for money, I would treat it as a joke. If they asked for money, I would tell them to give me money since I did not have any. Or I would say I would come back later if they asked me to come buy something. This usually worked, although sometimes I had to be blunt and tell them, “No, I am not giving you that.” It usually depended on my mood, too. The longer I was in-country the better I got at judging the situation and knowing whether I should be funny, be blunt, or just ignore it.

Sometimes jokes can backfire. When some guys were harassing me and another Volunteer, I shoed them away like I would a dog. It was a big mistake and they got really pissed off.”
Volunteers, and persons with whom Volunteers collaborate. The following list includes conduct that the Peace Corps considers to be offensive and must be avoided:

- Engaging in offensive conduct that unreasonably interferes with a staff member's or Volunteer's performance or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment
- Offensive verbal conduct such as obscene language, epithets, suggestive statements or innuendo, or derogatory comments
- Unwelcome physical conduct, such as touching themselves or gestures
- Creating or displaying offensive graphic materials that relate to race, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, genetic information, religion, color, national origin, age, marital status, parental status, disability, political affiliation, or union membership
- Emailing or texting sexually explicit or harassing messages
- Retaliating against staff or a Volunteer for their opposition to discrimination or participation in the discrimination complaint process
- Making submission to offensive conduct, either explicitly or implicitly, a term or condition of a staff member's employment or a Volunteer's service
- Using submission to or rejection of offensive conduct by an individual as the basis for tangible decisions affecting a staff member's employment or a Volunteer's service

As a Volunteer, your workplaces are varied; for example, an institution such as a school, or a geographical area, such as a site or community. You have the right to report to Peace Corps staff any actions by work partners or counterparts that create a hostile, intimidating, or offensive environment. If the perpetrator is another Volunteer or a member of Peace Corps staff, then you can report the incident to the Office of Civil Rights and Diversity.

**BURNOUT AND SELF-CARE**

Many Volunteers, at some point in their service, will likely experience some form of burnout. This usually results from excessive and prolonged stress that could be caused by unwanted contact, harassment, and petty crimes as well as the stressors of living in a foreign or impoverished country.

Burnout affects personal safety and security in a variety of ways. Fatigue, frustration, isolation, apathy, withdrawal—from community life or from site—and an increasingly negative attitude can all be symptoms of burnout. These are normal feelings, but they can lead to one or more increased personal safety risks:

- **Reduced situational awareness.** You may no longer be as careful or as observant as you used to be and, therefore, are more vulnerable to potential perpetrators.
- **Unhealthy coping mechanisms.** You may increase your alcohol consumption or engage in substance abuse that could put you in risky situations and reduce your situational awareness.
- **Engaging in risky behavior.** You may become less conscious of your personal safety and engage in activities that put you at increased risk of accidents or crime.
- **De-integration.** You may withdraw or engage in alienating behavior, such as yelling at children or confronting people in a hostile manner, which may reduce respect and standing in your community.

A degree of burnout may be normal over the course of your service. Refer to the following “Critical Thinking: Burnout” box. If you answered “yes” to several of these questions, you may need to find ways to deal with burnout.

**CRITICAL THINKING**

**BURNOUT**

- Do you spend more time in your house away from your host family?
- Do you find yourself regularly breaking policies?
- Are you spending more time out of site?
- Do you have trouble maintaining a constant level of awareness when you travel?
- Do you find yourself hanging out with your Volunteer friends and spending most of your time complaining about aspects of life and work in your host country?
questions, you may be experiencing service burnout. If any of these behaviors start to negatively affect your service, or that of your friends, review the “Secrets to Resiliency” list below to find ways to engage in positive coping behaviors. Developing positive support systems and self-care strategies early in service are ideal for helping you avoid most of these issues. You may also want to consider reaching out to Peace Corps staff or to your PCMO for additional support.

**SECRETS TO RESILIENCY FROM RPCVS**

Developing strategies for personal resiliency pays dividends long after the challenges faced during service are over. These strategies benefit not only you, but the other Volunteers around you as well. The figure below describes how you can develop your resiliency strategy.

**Resiliency tips**

| Find your purpose and meaning | It is easier to be persistent when what you are doing is tied to something personally meaningful. |
| Make it a game | It is the best way to stay in a positive mindset without stressing yourself out. |
| Do not compare yourself to other Volunteers | Everyone has their own challenges and struggles. |
| Be confident—but realistic | See challenges honestly, but believe in your own ability to take them on. |
| Prepare, prepare, prepare | It is easier to be resilient when you have prepared for as many outcomes as possible. |
| Focus on improvement | Every Volunteer experiences challenges with projects. Take the time to evaluate what went wrong so improvements can be made. |
| Give help and get help | Support from others helps keep you going, and giving others support does the same. |
| Celebrate small wins | Take joy where you can find it when good times seem scarce. |
| Find a way to laugh | Volunteers, staff, and scientists agree: a chuckle can help you cope with stress and keep going. |

**PEER TO PEER**

**WHEN YOU KNOW IT MAY BE A GOOD DAY TO READ A BOOK**

“One morning, about 2 years into my service, I was walking through town and some kids started yelling this common rhyme about foreigners at me like they always did. I must have been having a bad day or something. I had reached down and picked up a rock to throw at them before I knew what I was doing. I think I decided to spend the rest of the day reading a book in front of a fan.”