Sexual harassment can happen to anyone in any workplace. Within healthcare, 30%-40% of women have reported experiencing sexual harassment compared to 4% of men. Sexual harassment is defined as “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature. Harassment does not have to be of a sexual nature, however, and can include offensive remarks about a person’s sex. Both victim and the harasser can be either a woman or a man, and the victim and harasser can be the same sex.” Sexual harassment is among the disruptive workplace behaviors included in the AANA’s Promoting a Culture of Safety and Healthy Work Environment, Practice Considerations. These types of behaviors can create “barriers to fostering a culture of safety and are considered a public health threat by the World Health Organization.”

What is the environment in your workplace? Sharing this AANA resource may be helpful to making a change in your organization.

For individuals facing sexual harassment or incivility, visit resources available at aana.com/sexualharassment and aana.com/bullying. An incident can trigger past trauma, even from childhood, or set off new post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For resources, visit aana.com/ptsd and seek peer and/or professional help, when needed.

Her Story
I started my career as a Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist (CRNA), bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, eager to learn more and participate in a career where I could make a difference and help improve lives. A student registered nurse anesthetist’s (SRNA) first year transitioning into practice as a CRNA can be quite the hurdle—a new environment, new techniques and procedures without the safety net of a preceptor. During my first months as a CRNA, I experienced all the emotions that go along with these transitions—fear, anxiety, excitement and the unexpected discomfort and chaos that ensue when being sexually harassed by a male coworker.

It started off innocently enough with lots of personal questions, but that transitioned into blatant staring and awkward attempts to touch my hand or shoulders while I was actively working at my anesthesia station. I immediately expressed my discomfort with these actions, but they progressed to this individual invading my personal space and whispering a sexually suggestive remark just before a case. I expressed my discomfort and disgust in that moment with this comment and walked away.

I felt offended and violated. I’d never given this man any indication that this behavior was okay. As a new graduate, I was afraid, lost, and confused as to what to do. I wanted to excel at work and be known for the care I provided to my patients, not for this interaction. So, I kept quiet for a few weeks until I realized how unacceptable this behavior was. I ended up reporting these incidents to both my manager and my coworker’s manager.

Reflecting on the situation, I was naïve to think that this was properly handled, even though I reported it to management, as I never met with human resources (HR) in the immediate aftermath. According to the law and hospital policy, any allegations of sexual harassment must be investigated within seven days of being reported or else the employer is considered to be in violation of the law. I had no idea that sexual harassment is viewed as a chronic, debilitating disease to the medical community and results in “significant and costly loss of talent.”

Moving forward, I limited my interactions with this particular male coworker and with the rest of the operating room (OR) staff to convince myself I could handle the situation. However, I couldn’t. I started to feel self-conscious about my ability to do my job. It was as though I was under a microscope for appropriately reporting sexual harassment, and my stress level and anxiety went through the roof!

Every day after work I came home and cried for hours. After several weeks of tears, I had the realization that this wasn’t a situation that I created or that I could/should be handling on my own, so I stepped outside of myself and sought counseling.
Counseling significantly helped to reduce my anxiety and stress; however, the anxiety returned each time I walked through the OR doors and still had to work with this male coworker.

This male coworker, emboldened that he received no write up or reprimand from his management, stepped up and began to bully me. He berated me in front of intensive care unit (ICU) and OR staff for no reason, questioned my anesthetic choices, and even dared to discredit my abilities as an anesthesia provider in front of my colleagues and a patient I was actively caring for.

I was enraged and immediately reported these incidents to HR and was met with disdain and distrust. The HR department representative even suggested to me that I was asking for this treatment and fueling the fire by not bowing to male coworker’s constant and blatant disrespect. Even more astounding, one of my female colleagues told me I had asked for the scrutiny, stress, and anxiety by reporting the sexual harassment to upper-level management and HR.

Management assured me that they cared and wanted to make it a great work environment, but I could feel the animosity they harbored toward me for not accepting this behavior and reporting the incidents to upper management/HR as the harassment worsened. Institutions often consider harassment to be an individual problem instead of a problem within the organization. There is an obvious lack of progress to improve old practices and develop new standards to combat harassment.

At this point, I lost all faith in the system, but I never gave up on myself! I made the active decision to not allow this drama and management’s failures to hinder me. I continued counseling and chose every day to be happy. I wasn’t going to let this event negatively affect my emotions.

It took some time, but I am writing my story, not because I want empathy or pity, but because I hope that my experience will give others the courage to stand up for themselves and the knowledge on how to properly handle sexual harassment in the workplace.

Don’t do what I did and try to “deal with it.” You need to make some noise. NO ONE should be treated the way I was! Harassment and bullying should never be tolerated in the workplace. I’m lucky to have removed myself from that situation and found employment at another organization.

If It’s Happening to You…

Here are my recommendations on how to handle sexual harassment in the workplace:

1. Tell the harasser to stop and that their actions/comments are unwanted and inappropriate;
2. DOCUMENT everything! Report inappropriate behavior to management/HR in person, and in written form, via email or through your facility reporting system;
3. Consult an employment/harassment attorney;
4. Consider your employment options;
5. Seek emotional support from loved ones and recognize if/when professional help should be sought for healing.

Stand Up for Yourself and Your Patients

At the end of the day, my calling is to advocate and provide excellent care to my patients. That is why I wanted to be a CRNA (and to do some really cool stuff). In this already high-stakes profession, we sometimes forget about our own mental health. To whoever needs to hear this, YOU ARE STRONG, CAPABLE, AND DESERVE RESPECT! While it is absurd that I had to endure this situation for far too long, sexual harassment and bullying are behaviors we should never be forced to accept. I now choose not to accept them and I hope you choose not to accept them as well. Advocate for your patients and for yourself!

References