

Hate speech online and how to respond to it.

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Hate speech online and how to respond to it

Guide

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Hate speech online and how to respond to it

Hate speech, threats and other forms of online harassment have become an integral part of everyday life. Their scale poses a threat to a democratic society. Individuals or groups of individuals may choose or be forced to remain silent and partially or completely limit their participation in the online space in order to avoid the hate and threats that may follow the publication of an article, video or comment, for example, highlighting a social problem. Hate speech on the Internet thus has an impact on the functioning of our entire society. It also has a serious impact on specific women and men who, as a result, are unable to fully realise their potential and express themselves freely.

Hate speech in the online environment is often connected with gender hatred or gender stereotyping. Especially in relation to publicly speaking women, this society-wide problem occurs very often. Its intensity is often striking.

"Thank God she is barren it won't breed."

"Push it back into the vagina and fuck it into something proper 🙄"

"You're going to hang in public in the Old Town Square, I'll take care of that."

"She's a fascist who only paid for her college degree anyway"

"Kick her lady parts, do you think Fiala fucks her?"

"She should have been hanged by her umbilical cord when she was born, she's disgusting to look at and she's barren. Spit on her"

"Brave woman- just make sure you look in your car and under your car and behind your car every day....."

We went through over a million comments on social media while compiling this guide. We were touched by these comments, and they were not even directed at us. Sometimes there is an escalation of comments, see the example in the box:

- *Only a shotgun left for this cow*
- *A knife will do*
- *I'd take a pickaxe and shovel and bury only your ass will show so people have a place to park their bike*
- *Put a dick in her mouth. She'll be quiet. 🍆*
- *It's gonna take somebody mental to give that idiot a good smack*
- *As long as the swines aren't afraid to go out in public, something's wrong. 🙄*
- *Dump her in the dam over there. Filthy dirty fucker*

The recipients of hate speech, and often the attackers, are often unaware that hate speech expressed in the online space can be considered illegal and they can defend themselves through legal means. For those affected and those around them, it is often difficult to decide how (or even whether) to respond. The aim of this guide is to present the options and remedies available, including the specific experiences of people who experience hate attacks.

1. What to do if you are the target of hateful comments

Hateful comments made online can have just as serious consequences as hateful comments made in person. In addition, comments on social media last longer and, unlike hate speech on the tram or elsewhere in public, can reach a much larger group of people, often our classmates at school, colleagues at work or other groups of people who are important to us. As a result, we may become apprehensive about sharing content that is important to our personal or professional development.

It is perfectly normal to feel disappointed, frustrated or anxious when faced with hateful comments or other forms of cyber-violence. Reactions from those around us such as "It's only online, so just ignore it!", "Then don't read it! Why do you care what other people think of you?" may not match how we feel. No one should belittle or question our feelings.

Specific strategies for how to respond to and cope with hate speech vary depending on the context and our current needs and abilities. We may also choose different approaches or combinations of approaches depending on whether the hateful comments are appearing on our own social networks/platforms (e.g. under our own Instagram photo or in our Twitter thread) or whether the hateful comments are appearing elsewhere on social networks, sites or platforms over whose content we have even less control. But one basic principle always applies:

It is not your responsibility to educate others at the expense of your own mental health and well-being.

Hateful comments are the responsibility of the commenter, not you.

Here are some tips on how to respond to hate speech. It is always important to choose the solution that best suits the specific situation.

Document

It is a good idea to document hate speech, even if we do not want to take any further action. If hate speech continues or escalates, records can help in prosecution. Harmful content should ideally be saved using a screenshot that shows the identity of the user and the time and date of publication.

Block the aggressor(s)

There are options on electronic devices and social media platforms to block specific numbers, user profiles, content and keywords. On some, it is also possible to block any other account a user creates.

Tell others

Confide in someone you trust. However, it may be that the person in question will not react as you would need, as they cannot imagine the situation and its real consequences and implications. For example, one of the counselling centres or helplines can help.

Ask for support

If you're facing hateful comments, you can ask your friends, colleagues and the online community to stand up for you in the face of, for example, a troll attack.

Report hate speech

The issue of protection against (not only) gender-based hate speech is also addressed by online platforms themselves. In general, social networks define for themselves which content they consider objectionable. Both Facebook (Meta) and X (Twitter) set the rules in their usage policies. For both platforms, limits are set for statements and speech. For example, both Facebook and X stipulate that gender-based hate speech is against the community's principles. They also offer users a (user-friendly) option to report a post, profile or message with inappropriate content.

If the reported content is in violation of the platform's terms and conditions, the various establishing companies take different measures. While Meta's platforms only take delete/leave decisions, Platform X has a range of multiple options (restricting visibility/deleting/flagging a post...). However, it should be stressed that Meta and X platforms offer the possibility for a user whose content has been marked as banned to express his/her disagreement with the deletion of the content in question and to request a reconsideration of the position.

Set privacy on social networks

Check the settings under "Privacy settings", "Privacy and security", etc. Hence, determine who can send you messages, who can post comments, who can tag you, etc.

Moderate the discussion

Hide or delete inappropriate comments and/or their authors. You can also report accounts that create objectionable content to the social network provider.

Delegate

Delegate the management of social media and official email to someone else who will delete the inappropriate content and preserve the evidence for you.

Defend yourself legally

You can also defend yourself legally against online hate speech. The best option depends on the intensity of the given attack.

2. How to react as a bystander

Confronting hate speech is not easy. There are very limited options for individuals who are targeted to fight back. The most that can be done about hate speech is by those who see it and at the same time are not targeted.

If you see hateful comments online, you have a choice. You can support the person who is the target of the attack, or you can choose to do nothing and continue scrolling. If you choose to help, you have multiple strategies to choose from. It is far from necessary to go directly into battle with the aggressor.

The most important thing is to show the person facing the attack that they are not alone, that others can see what's happening to them and are on their side.

Choose the form of help that suits you best. So what can you specifically do?

Speak directly to the person facing the attack

You can send a message to the person who is the target of hate speech. Ask if they are okay and offer your support. Whether it's your friend, someone you only know a little, or a complete stranger, a few words of support can help make them feel better.

Express your involvement. There is great value in simply addressing the victim with the words "I'm sorry about what happened to you, I want you to know that you are not alone." You can also let the person affected know that you agree with the comment, speech or article that has been targeted and that expressing those views and opinions is important and valuable. If it is a public figure whose work you can appreciate, do so. For example, you might write "I really appreciate your work and I'm sorry you're facing attacks because of it."

Hi Adele, I have just seen the crazy hate on Twitter. I'm so sorry, this is really intolerable behaviour from these people. Sending lots of strength! Is there anything I can do for you? Take care.

Hi, thank you so much for the support, I'm not going to lie, I'm pretty blown away.

It is important to avoid using phrases that might make the situation worse for the person concerned. "You must be so embarrassed" or "Don't worry about it" won't help. If you do not know the person who has been targeted very well, you can ask someone close to them to check how they are handling the situation. Alternatively, if the person is interested, you can advise them where to go for help.

Respond to hate speech publicly

If you feel confident and safe enough, respond to hate speech on the platform where it is happening. Do not focus your response on the person of the author, but on the content of the statement itself.

If possible, refute false claims with facts. Refer to reliable sources. You can also point out that the statement fulfils the characteristics of hate speech. However, be aware that some messages are published with the intent to provoke and "troll" and that their authors are not interested in substantive discussion. At the same time, it is important to remember that if you engage in such a discussion, you may become a target of attack.

Report hate speech

Although you may not be the target of hate speech yourself, you can often report it on the platform on which it occurs. You can also document hateful behaviour and file a possible criminal complaint.

Confront the aggressor

If you know the perpetrator, it is possible to try to set boundaries. Tell them how you feel about their behaviour and explain that they should not behave in this way. However, be prepared that they may not respond sympathetically. They may laugh at you or make the situation seem unimportant.

Personal help

Finally, here are some tips on how to respond if the person who has been targeted confides in you and wants to discuss the situation. So what is a good thing to do, and what not to do?

- Let the recipient of the attack know that what happened is not their fault. The aggressor is always to blame and the victim is not to blame for the hateful comments, nor did they provoke them in any way.
- Ask what the victim of the attacks would need and how they wish to proceed in the situation. Do not force them to leave social media or not comment on the situation.
- If the person does not want to deal with the situation, be supportive and do not force them to do anything.
- Do not convince the victim of the attacks that they "should" address the situation. The best way is to give them as much information as possible about the solutions and only if they decide to address the situation, move to the next step.
- Never do anything without the consent of the person who has confided in you (for example, do not share screenshots of hateful communications without their consent, which can trigger another wave of hateful comments).
- Inform the person concerned of any action you are going to take in advance.
- If the victim of the attack wishes, help them seek professional help.

Let's look at an example of how a supportive conversation might look like:

Magda: "I shared an article on X about climate change and wrote that I was angry that the boomers had left us in the lurch. And an awful lot of people wrote to me saying that I was stupid, that I didn't understand anything and that I shouldn't whine. And one wrote that someone should smash the young cow's mouth so she'd know what it looks like to be left in the lurch. And then others joined in, telling me I should be raped and sending me private messages."

Jana: "Oh yeah, I'm really sorry about that. X is a disgusting network. You're brave to even post anything there. And those people are really bad."

Magda: "I shouldn't have posted anything."

Jana: "But you have the right to write your opinions. On the other hand, they don't have the right to write such hateful content, and certainly not to threaten you."

Magda: "Hm."

Jana: "How do you feel? That must be hard."

Magda: "I feel terrible. It's hard to describe when you haven't experienced it."

Jana: "I guess you're right. It's completely understandable that you feel terrible. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Magda: "And how would you like to help me? I mean, it's online..."

Jana: "I'm sure it would be good if you saved the messages and comments in case you ever need or want to report it. I can do that for you if you don't want to look at it again. I can even block them for you if you want. We can also try contacting XY counselling to see if there's anything they can do to help. But if you don't want to, we don't have to do anything and we can just go watch a movie now..."

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