

How to craft mental and emotional safety on set

We know what to do to keep people's bodies safe from injury on set. Some practices are common sense and others are set for us by folks who specialize in how bodies can work safely.

Our minds need safe practices, too. Mental health injuries from bullying, harassment, misgendering, teasing, microaggressions, and other harsh actions lead to real harm. Everyone on set can add to a healthy environment for bodies and minds by putting these actions into practice:

Use the set's code of conduct. The codes are meant to help you and your co-workers to create a space that works for everyone. Actions should be reasonable and common sense, like addressing co-workers the way they want to be addressed.

Work with your set's culture safety officer. This is the person to go to if you are struggling to get the mental and emotional safety you deserve. The culture safety officer will help to sort out issues between people and will raise issues to department or production heads if they need that extra help. You can ask to have a culture safety officer if the production needs one on set. People leaders can use a culture safety officer, too.

Hold zero tolerance for bad behaviours. Co-workers may make mistakes, and everyone has a responsibility to call those in when they happen. Helping co-workers is the way to make a space for everyone to learn better behaviours. You have a voice about bad behaviours you experience and when you see them happen to your co-workers. Be ready to call in those unwelcome actions in a way that helps the person doing them understand how they have caused harm and how they can avoid repeating those choices. Be clear and be fast: the closer the call-in happens to the action, the better your words will sink in. If the same mistakes happen over and over to you or anyone else, or if they are done on purpose, raise the issue to the set's culture safety officer.

Learn from mistakes. They will happen, and it will be how you recover that makes the difference. When you make a mistake, make a sincere apology without being defensive. Understand what the mistake was and the harm it may have caused. Then, work to do better next time. Learning from a mistake is more likely to stick. Remember, the best apology is a change in behaviour.

Ask. Making assumptions about people can also be harmful, especially if they already feel singled out or unwelcome. Share your pronouns and ask others which pronouns they use. Ask about a co-worker's availability to work on certain days instead of assuming they follow a specific cultural or religious norm. Ask whether someone can do a job rather than assume they cannot.

Ask responsibly. Some questions are better left unasked. Did a co-worker have surgery? Are they taking medication? Where were they born? If a co-worker initiates the discussion, you *may* be able to ask personal questions, but tread carefully.

Model the way. Everyone wants to feel safe and appreciated. You can be that person—the one who shows how to pay attention to emotional and mental health on set. You have the power to model the actions in the code of conduct, and be your regular, cool self while doing it. Your example can shape how your co-workers show up, and all together, you make a safer space for everyone.

Know that people have lived different lives. Have you ever been told you were too sensitive? Not sensitive enough? How did that feel? We cannot know the sum of someone's experiences to judge how they react to feeling harmed, but we can work to respect they may have a lot to deal with. There is a term, intersectionality, that talks about the complex ways in which some people unsafe or excluded than because they are not part of the perceived majority. They could be part of a gender or sexual minority, a cultural minority, an economic minority at the same time. This puts a lot of pressure on a person and the last thing they need is a workplace that reminds them they are outside of the social norms. Be kind. Be fair. Respect for people's stories and lives goes a long way to creating mental and emotional safety.

Dig deeper

National Film Board of Canada Equity and Representation -

<https://production.nfbonf.ca/en/equity/#:~:text=In%20February%202021%2C%20the%20NFB,also%20within%20the%20institution%20itself>

Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-BnAW4NyOak>

Government of Canada's introduction to Intersectionality - <https://women-gender-equality.canada.ca/gbaplus-course-cours-acspplus/eng.html>

Employee Resource Groups: Toolkit for Creating and Sustaining Effective ERGs - <https://ccdi.ca/media/4177/ccdi-toolkit-employee-resource-groups-a-toolkit-for-creating-and-sustaining-effective-ergs.pdf>