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Career Advice

# Help! My adviser won't stop looking down my shirt!

 By Alice Huang  
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*Alice and her friends answer questions that you don't want to ask your preceptor, peer, or colleagues regarding your career in science. Send your questions to Alice's attention via [SciCareerEditor@aaas.org](mailto:SciCareerEditor@aaas.org).*

*The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission defines unlawful sexual harassment as “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature.”*

Dear Alice,

**Q:** I've just joined a new lab for my second postdoc. It's a good lab. I'm happy with my project. I think it could really lead to some good results. My adviser is a good scientist, and he seems like a nice guy. Here's the problem: Whenever we meet in his office, I catch him trying to look down my shirt. Not that this matters, but he's married.

What should I do?

—Bothered

Dear Bothered,

**A:** Imagine what life would be like if there were no individuals of the opposite—or preferred—sex. It would be pretty dull, eh? Well, like it or not, the workplace is a part of life.

It's true that, in principle, we're all supposed to be asexual while working. But the kind of behavior you mention is common in the workplace. Once, a friend told me that he was so distracted by an attractive visiting professor that he could not concentrate on a word of her seminar. Your adviser may not even be aware of what he is doing.

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) [defines](#) unlawful sexual harassment as “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature.” It goes on to say that “harassment is illegal when it is so frequent or severe that it creates a hostile or offensive work environment or when it results in an adverse employment decision (such as the victim being fired or demoted).” I'm not an attorney, but to me the behavior you're describing doesn't seem unlawful by this standard.

Some definitions of sexual harassment do include inappropriate looking or staring, especially when it's repeated to the point where the workplace becomes inhospitable. Has it reached that point? I don't mean to suggest that leering is appropriate workplace behavior—it isn't—but it is human and up to a point, I think, forgivable. Certainly there are worse things, including the unlawful behaviors described by the EEOC. No one should ever use a position of authority to take sexual advantage of another.

As long as your adviser does not move on to other advances, I suggest you put up with it, with good humor if you can. Just make sure that he is listening to you and your ideas, taking in the results you are presenting, and taking your science seriously. His attention on your chest may be unwelcome, but you need his attention on your science and his best advice.

—Alice

Dr. Huang is one of the pioneering researchers in molecular animal virology. She trained at Wellesley College and Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. She has worked at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology,

Harvard Medical School, New York University (NYU), and California Institute of Technology. She has served on the boards of the University of Massachusetts, Johns Hopkins University, and the Keck Graduate Institute at the Claremont Colleges, in addition to many other nonprofit organizations. She introduced vesicular stomatitis virus as an experimental model in virology. She carried out many of the initial investigations on the molecular biology of virion structure, replication, macromolecular synthesis, viral spread, and virulence. Her work on the virion-associated RNA-dependent RNA polymerase led to the grouping of many viruses as negative-strand viruses. Her studies on pseudotypes, especially between RNA and DNA viruses, demonstrate the spread of viruses to new host cells and provide important tools for genetic engineering.

As a teacher, Dr. Huang has taught and mentored undergraduates, graduate students, medical students, postdoctoral research fellows, and clinical fellows. She has guided junior faculty members and department chairs. As an administrator, Dr. Huang provided the vision and obtained support for beginning what is now known as "Silicon Alley" around the NYU neighborhood. She is a past president of both the American Society for Microbiology and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (the publisher of *Science Careers*), two of the largest scientific societies in the world. She also dedicated 18 years to shepherding the Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology, together with Sydney Brenner and Chris Tan, into a successful center of research in what is now known as the Biopolis in Singapore. She continues to consult with research institutions and governments, sharing her expertise and practicing science diplomacy and policy.

Throughout her career, Dr. Huang has advocated for women in science. She encourages thoughtful approaches to reforms in teaching, to attract students with diverse backgrounds and interests to become interested in and committed to careers in science. She has been honored for her advocacy as well for her research accomplishments. Her wealth of experience as a leader and team player in research, administration, and advocacy prepares her well to provide advice to those pursuing careers in science.

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