

Dealing with inappropriate comments

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I had gone to visit the lovely man in the hospital every day. I knew his condition was terminal, and as his pastor, these moments were precious.

The nurse came in and I started to excuse myself. But the patient said, “Don’t leave.” Then turning to the nurse, he introduced me. “Betty, I want you to meet my girlfriend, Carol.”

I laughed, stretched out my hand to shake the nurse’s and said, “Actually, I’m the REVEREND Carol Howard Merritt, his PASTOR. You can call me Carol, but he is not allowed to call me ‘girlfriend.’” I gave him a stern sideways glance and shook my head.

I started in the pastorate when I was in my mid-twenties. I was short and good-natured, so I received the comments quite a bit. I don’t as much any longer. I’m not young any more, so that’s probably the main reason. But I also got better with reaction time and gained some tools to deflect the comments.

At first, my only response to the shock and anger that I felt was to giggle—a girlish giggle—which could easily be misinterpreted as flirting. After a few years, I’ve developed more tricks. If you’re starting out in all of this, here are some things that you can do. These tools should be used for use with verbal, awkward, unwanted situations. If there is a physical touch, a verbal violation, or if you are in danger, the tools should be entirely different.

Please feel free to share your own strategies in the comments.

Laughter. Laughter can often be your best weapon. I’m not talking about the giggle that often seeped out of my mouth because I was so horribly embarrassed and I didn’t know what else to do with myself. I’m talking about a full-lipped, loud, “HA!” One that a character in a movie would use while wielding a sword that landed on her victim’s chest. It’s a laugh that says, “I’m not afraid of you and I’m *not* keeping this a secret.”

It sounds silly, but laughter is an amazing tool, when used properly. Practice it in the mirror. Get your victory cackle down. Use it when someone is trying to take away your power. You can even grab the person next to you, and say loudly, "Did you hear what he just said?" Then say something like, "How awkward was *that*?" Or, "Can you imagine saying that to your pastor?"

Ignore. If someone doesn't call you by your name, but uses a pet name for you, ignore them, just as you would ignore a three-year-old who is being disrespectful. When they use your correct name, then respond with, "Oh. Were you talking to me? I couldn't tell, because *sweetheart is not my name!*"

Of course, ignoring is not an option when you are in danger.

Practice. Do you tend to play things over in your mind? Do you talk about the situation *ad nauseum* to your friends or loved ones? Do you tell yourself, *Quit thinking about this! You can't change the past!*

Would a boxer say, "I'm just not going to think about how defend myself from that left-hook that defeated me in the last match, because I can't change the past"? No, he would use the defeat as a learning tool. It's true that you can't change the past, but your mind might be doing you a favor by practicing for the next time it happens. Because, there will be a next time.

Practice what you should have said. Say what you wish you could say. Ask your sassiest friend what he would say in the situation. Soften the blow, if you need to. Make it sharper, if the situation demands. Look in the mirror and say it to yourself until you are comfortable with the words. Part the power of harassment comes from the sheer surprise. You can take away that edge when you practice your responses.

Instincts. I recently spent a couple of weeks in a cabin in a small town in Georgia. In my quick interactions with people, the strangers called me Honey, Hon, Baby, Sug, Sweetie and a thousand other pet names. If I were serving a church in that small town, it would be difficult for me to protest every time someone called me "Hon." The names were a part of the cultural norm. It might be a waste of energy to get offended each time it happened.

But when a name or comment is used to belittle you or as a sexual advance, an alarm will go off in your tummy. Listen to that alarm. Trust your gut.

Friends. When that alarm goes off, it's not always because the circumstances/facts/evidence dictate the warning, so it's important to have friends who trust your instincts.

For instance, I did not sense an alarm in the hospital room. I did have one go off one time when I was alone with a powerful church leader. He was ever-so-slightly invading my personal space. And he was putting me down, saying, "Who *are* you? You're like, this tiny little pastor. Why do you have all of these readers? And you have radio show? Why would people listen to *you*?"

I started backing away. I can't tell you why, but I couldn't shake the feeling that his belittling was his way of flirting. The bell rang loudly. I confided in a friend who trusted my instincts. He agreed that I should avoid the man.

Sure enough, a few months later, I found out that powerful church leader was a key in covering up a major sex scandal in his church. My instincts were correct. He was dangerous. Even though the cold, hard facts of the situation did not give clues, my stomach did. Often the key to trusting yourself is having friends who trust you.

If the perpetrator is powerful, trusted, or a major donor, people will trust you less. But you need someone who will be on your side. And you need a witness.

Anger. I used to feel guilty because I didn't go nuclear every time a situation deserved a slap on the wrist. As a feminist, I feel very black-and-white about this stuff, but in reality, things are often gray. But one thing is for sure, if you feel anger, trust your emotions. Don't be afraid to use your anger.

People don't want you to be angry and they will even try to suppress it—they will call you an angry feminist or a b*tch. If you're a woman, you may regulate your voice so that it's barely audible, and you'll hear later how you were "TOTALLY FREAKING OUT." People may talk about how you "BURST INTO TEARS" when your voice has a slight quiver. There's a lot of power in anger, so people will try to tamp it down in a variety of ways.

And even people who love you will try to do what they can to make the situation go away. The problem is that they will often try to make the situation go away by denying that there's something wrong.

I know I used an older gentleman as an example at the beginning of this post. These things are often generational, but that is not an excuse. If you're being harassed by an old guy (or woman) and it's making you angry, listen to your anger before you listen to the person who tries to make the situation go away by denying there's something wrong.

These are complicated issues and I've barely scratched the surface. But it's important to talk about them and to hone your skills as you deal with them.