

ON BEING AN ALLY

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What is an ally?

An ally is a member of the agent social group who takes a stand against social injustice directed at target groups (whites who speak out against racism, men who are anti-sexist). An ally works to be an agent of social change rather than an agent of oppression. When a form of oppression has multiple target groups, as do racism, ableism, and heterosexism, target group members can be allies to other targeted social groups they are not part of (lesbians can be allies to bisexual people, African American people can be allies to Native Americans, blind people can be allies to people who use wheelchairs).

Characteristics of an ally:

- Feels good about own social group membership, is comfortable and proud of own identity
- Takes responsibility for learning about own and target group heritage, culture and experience, and how oppression works in everyday life
- Listens to and respects the perspectives and experiences of target group members
- Acknowledges unearned privilege received as a result of agent group status and works to eliminate or change privilege into rights that target group members can also enjoy
- Recognizes that unlearning oppressive beliefs and actions is a life-long process, not a single event, and welcomes each learning opportunity
- Is willing to take risks, try new behaviors, act to change things in spite of own fear and resistance from other agent group members
- Takes care of self to avoid burn-out
- Acts against social injustice out of a belief that it is in her/his own self-interest to do so
- Is willing to make mistakes, learn from them and try again
- Is willing to be confronted about own behavior and attitudes and consider change
- Is committed to taking action against social injustice in own sphere of influence
- Understands own growth and response patterns and when she/he is on a learning edge
- Understands the connections among all forms of social injustice
- Believes she/he can make a difference by acting and speaking out against social injustice
- Knows how to cultivate support from other allies

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Agent responses to being called on oppressive behavior:

Ways to Learn:

- **LET GO OF UNPRODUCTIVE EMOTIONAL REACTIONS:** I notice and let go of feelings of defensiveness, embarrassment, anger, fear, guilt, or shame that interfere with my ability to listen to what you are saying.
- **LISTEN:** I focus on understanding what you are telling me even though I am probably having many feelings about what you are saying that could interfere with my ability to listen.
- **SEEK MORE INFORMATION:** I ask questions to make sure I understand your reaction. I read. I attend workshops. I talk with other agent group members.
- **RECEIVE YOUR FEEDBACK AS A GIFT:** I understand that when someone offers information so that I can become more conscious of my role in maintaining social injustice it is a gift not to be taken lightly. I welcome the information and believe it to be to my benefit to receive it.
- **TAKE A NEW PERSPECTIVE:** I try to look at the situation from your perspective. I try to understand your perspective by thinking about one of my own target group memberships.
- **PROBLEM SOLVE:** I take responsibility for identifying ways that I might change my actions. I do not assume that you should or will help me.
- **INTEGRATE NEW BEHAVIOR:** I choose different behaviors in the future because I believe it is important for me to do so, not just because I am afraid of being confronted again.

Ways to Avoid Learning:

- **DENIAL:** I did not say or do anything that was oppressive or offensive.
- **DISMISSAL:** You are overreacting, being too sensitive, blowing this out of proportion
- **ATTACK:** I say something back to you intended to hurt you or make you angry.
- **CLAIM IT WAS A JOKE:** I insist I was only kidding and the problem is that you have no sense of humor or are taking things too seriously.
- **EXPLANATION:** I try to convince you that you are misinterpreting my actions by explaining and rationalizing how my actions were not really evidence of prejudice on my part
- **GUILT:** I am so ashamed that I offended you that all I can focus on is my own distress that you think I am prejudiced. I feel terrible and apologize even if I do not really understand what the problem is. Sometimes I get angry if you don't immediately forgive me and help me feel better.

- **SHOCK:** I am so surprised by being confronted that I am immobilized. I cannot hear what you have to say and I cannot think about what I want to do.
- **TRIVIALIZATION:** I seek support from other more "friendly" target group members to reassure myself that you are being unreasonable and unfair.
- **GANG UP:** I seek support from other agent group members to reassure myself that you are being unreasonable and unfair.

