

# Growing as an Ally

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## Things to Remember:

- It is possible that someone from a different group may experience the same situation in a completely different way

A person who lost several people they loved in a fire would react very differently to a fire alarm going off than someone who has only experienced fire alarms as drills. Same fire alarm, different thoughts and actions. If the person who experienced loss reacted dramatically to a fire alarm, you wouldn't tell them that they were oversensitive or freaking out. Keep this in mind when someone points out experiences of oppression. They may have very different past experiences around the same incident or situation.

- Remember that the *impact* of an oppressive incident is more important, not the *intent* of the person, group, or event

When person X accidentally slams a door on person Y's hand, you wouldn't concentrate on whether person X meant to do it or not. You would attend to person Y's hand and make sure they are all right. Once their pain is addressed, you can examine what happened and how, but not until you address the person impacted.

- Think about how you can use your identities with privilege to speak up for other groups

Sometimes, when people stand up for themselves, they are dismissed – "You're being too sensitive," "You're pushing your own agenda," "You're only focused on your own issues." When you have an identity with privilege and you stand up for groups that experience oppression around the same identity, it is much harder for people to dismiss what you say, because you don't have selfish motives. If an able person interrupts a "cripple" comment, he/she is not accused of speaking up to make his/her own life better.

- "Comfortable" and "Normal" are not the same as "Best" and "Correct"

Sometimes, we assume things are a certain way because that's the way it's supposed to be. We also sometimes do things out of habit without considering how it might impact others because "everyone else does it." The "way things are" have led to many groups of people experiencing mistreatment, so there must be something off-kilter. If people are often not respected or welcome for who they are, "comfortable" and "normal" clearly has not led to "best" and "correct."

## **Things To Do:**

- Be an aware witness to oppression: listen, notice, identify

Most oppression happens NOT because people are bad or mean harm but because people don't realize what's happening and because others silently let it happen. Being alert means you are less likely to stumble into an unknowing mistake or that you let things continue to happen.

- Be inclusive without putting someone on the spot

Sometimes, people try to make the world a better place by attacking the person who made a mistake. Although you may stop the person in the moment (or even in the future), you haven't necessarily made another ally. People aren't motivated to learn from mistakes if someone else's approach is "that was such a stupid mistake."

- Do your own learning

Sometimes, people who experience mistreatment again and again are asked over and over again to "teach" others what their experience is like. This can feel like insult added to injury. Be sure that you are learning about oppressions from other sources (articles, books, workshops), too, so that you're not adding to the burden.

- Build genuine relationships

Whether it's someone who shares many identities with you or someone who is very different, genuine relationships allow for many things. People are more likely to hear your constructive comments because they know you care about them as a person. People are more likely to share experiences that help you understand oppression better if they know you're not just out to "use" them. You yourself are more likely to learn and understand the variety of thinking, experiences, and actions of others.

- In the context of a genuine relationship, ask questions

If you have a genuine relationship with someone, you can ask questions and not raise defensiveness or suspicion. You can ask the person who expresses biased opinions or actions, "can I ask where you learned that," or "have you thought about..." You can ask a person with target identities, "can I ask what this situation was like for you," or "do you sometimes feel like..." In the context of a genuine relationship, these questions are less threatening or worrisome.

- Celebrate your identities of privilege

If your approach is "I feel so guilty for being white," or "I'm not like those other men," it makes you much less likely to join in and be a part of the solution. If your approach is "I am so grateful for the privileges I have as a heterosexual person, and I am excited to make those privileges available to everyone," or "I can relate to other people with class privilege, so I can help them understand classism better," you become an active participant in undoing oppression.