



Interrupting Oppressive Behavior

What happens when you encounter harmful jokes, comments, or actions?

Do you have a plan for what to do or say?

Whenever you experience oppressive behavior, you can choose your reaction from a range of possible responses:

Hurt (work against inclusion)		Help (work toward inclusion)				
Actively join in the behavior	Have no response	Educate yourself	Interrupt the behavior	Interrupt and educate	Support others' proactive responses	Initiate a proactive response

Mary McClintock created this chart as an *action continuum*: it starts with oppressive behavior on the left and moves toward active justice-oriented behavior on the right.

It can be hard to take action to stop behavior like inappropriate jokes, comments that play into harmful stereotypes, and actions that erase or demean others' experiences. It's easy to feel awkward, uncomfortable, or caught off-guard.

Try using the action continuum to think about the situations you might encounter and mentally rehearse some possible responses.

See the next page for examples of each type of response.

Some situations might require responding at different times:

- saying something in the moment
- talking to the individual at a later time
- bringing it up to the group at a later time
- bringing it up to an authority figure
- mentioning it in an email, note, or text

Make sure you also choose a reaction that fits the situation. Consider:

- the personal risk to you
- your power in the situation
- your understanding of the problem or social injustice at hand

If you can make an effort to respond appropriately to oppressive behavior, it will make spaces more just and inclusive for everyone!

For more information and further examples, please see: McClintock, Mary. "How to Interrupt Oppressive Behavior." Camping Magazine, v63 n2 p.32-34, Nov-Dec 1990





Potential incident

At a meeting of your student organization, someone tells a joke about gay men and femininity.

The gay-identified people in the group laughed a little, but you could tell they were uncomfortable. Now it is a running joke in the group.

Next time it comes up, what do you do?

According to the action continuum, here are some potential responses. You could adapt many of these responses for a variety of comments or situations.

Actions that hurt

Actively joining in oppressive behavior

Joining in means doing something that supports the behavior.

- Laughing at the joke and telling another.

Having no response

Having no response means doing nothing. It implicitly condones the inappropriate behavior.

- Not laughing at the joke.
- Not saying anything to the people targeted.

Actions that help

Educating yourself

This is when you learn more about what is behind the oppressive behavior, without necessarily intervening in the incident.

- Reading about how homophobia plays out in schools and other public systems.
- Reading about LGBTQ lives and experiences in the face of discrimination.

Interrupting the behavior

This is when you express your disapproval.

- “Actually, I don’t think that’s funny.”
- “That’s not appropriate. Why did you say it?”

Interrupt and educate

This means expressing your disapproval of the behavior *and* explaining why it’s oppressive.

- “I don’t think gay jokes are funny because that’s like saying LGBTQ people aren’t worthy of real respect.”
- “Stereotypes aren’t that funny because they reduce LGBTQ lives and experiences to a silly caricature.”
- “That’s not really funny because it’s saying that being feminine is bad.”

Supporting others’ proactive responses

This means supporting others’ efforts to educate or take action that promotes understanding differences.

- Sharing resources or perspectives that helped you unlearn oppressive behavior.
- Recommending a relevant resource or website.

Initiating a proactive response yourself

This means taking some kind of action that helps others understand and value cultural difference.

- Organizing a group in your department to work toward inclusive policies.
- Planning a social justice workshop for your coworkers or your student organization.

Try thinking about these responses in different contexts. What if you want to respond to the behavior of a supervisor? What about a stranger you overhear in public? What about within your family?

Practice with the options on the continuum can help you decide how to respond in the moment.

