

10 Ways to be an Ally

As I have gotten deeper into anti-oppression work I find that I discover more and more subtleties and complexities than I ever considered. Learning to be a good ally is not a linear education with some sort of graduation or certification at the end. It is a process full of experimentation, humility, confusion, challenge, and clarity. This list is by no means complete. It's really just a few suggestions on how to turn your mind towards solidarity.

1. Consider your position and how it benefits you to be in that position As a white person, a heterosexual person, a person with money, a man, etc. one has certain privileges that are not afforded to others. Many of these privileges are unearned, meaning they are afforded to the person, simply because they are white, a man, a heterosexual. The idea of privilege is also bigger than just making a list of these unearned benefits. It is important to understand how these benefits affect your daily life, your career, your education, and your relationships with authority (landlords, police, bosses, teachers, etc.) among other things. The idea is not necessarily to make a hierarchy of oppression but rather consider how all our identities intersect. For example, if someone is poor but is also white they may not have class privilege, but as a white person, it is likely that they'll have an easier time being poor than a person of color with the same income level. For more on white privilege specifically check out Peggy McIntosh's article "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (<http://www.nyinbp.org/reference/WhitePrivilege.pdf>)

2. Do a personal inventory It is helpful to understand how particular issues like racism, sexism, etc. have played out in your own life. One way to do this is to write about all the times that you can remember when some form of oppression affected your life. This could mean that you were the recipient or the perpetrator of oppressive behaviors. It could also be things that you observed or events with which you were personally involved. It could be painful memories from school, work, family, etc. A personal inventory may also include a very honest evaluation of your feelings, thoughts, experiences with, and beliefs about people who are different than you. As a heterosexual, you may discover feelings of discomfort about gay or transgendered people. This doesn't mean you're a bad person. It does mean that you have thoughts or feelings that could lead to perpetuating oppression.

3. Do your homework Sometimes people from a dominant culture have a very sincere interest in understanding people from other cultures, races, genders, or sexual orientations. One way to do so is to be in conversation with those other cultures. However, there is a big difference between a natural or intentional conversation about oppression and simply asking someone who has experienced oppression to teach you about it. Asking one person of another culture to be your teacher is disrespectful for a couple of reasons. First, experiences of oppression are utterly personal and often painful. When a white person asks a person of color to share their experiences it could trigger some painful memories.

Second, this creates a false understanding of entire cultures and people. When we ask one person to speak for an entire people, this is what is known as tokenism. Humans are so wonderfully diverse, even within subcultures. Latinos are not just Mexicans and what one African-American person thinks about an issue may be different than what another thinks. When we tokenize someone, we run the risk of reductionist essentialism, reducing a whole group of people into one fixed idea about who they are. Curiously, white people are rarely, if ever asked to represent the ideas and beliefs of their entire race.

Third, there are so many other ways to get a multicultural perspective. Many, many books, articles, and videos are out there to give someone an understanding of other cultures. In seeking these things out one should consider looking into the history of a culture and understanding what role your own culture played in their history. For example, how did policy decisions by able-bodied people affect alter-abled people? Consider the books you read and the movies you watch. Are the authors, actors, producers usually from a dominant culture? When one is in conversation with someone who is talking about their experiences in oppression, the best, most supportive thing they can do is to just listen and learn. While some things may sound difficult to believe it is important to remember that this person knows their experience better than we do and that our privilege may have made such experiences unthinkable in our own lives. Receptive listening also ensures that the experiences of people who have been oppressed, as well as the people themselves do not become invisible. Listening can be an act of solidarity.

4. Consider the difference between guilt and action

Discovering that one has benefits that others do not simply because of circumstance can sometimes lead to feelings of guilt or shame. While it is certainly useful to have a sense of regret for conscious or unconscious ways that we have personally or communally perpetuated oppression, it doesn't necessarily serve us to dwell in that regret. Oppressed people may not care if people in a dominant culture feel bad or guilty. However, they might very well care about how you act upon that guilt. If you want to make a difference, don't be guilty, be active. Being active means interrupting oppressive comments or conversations but it also means active participation in the struggle. *Rejecting or redistributing privileges & resources, taking risks when doing so.*

5. Be clear on why you are involved in the struggle (against racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc)

If you do take action it is important to consider why. Sometimes people from the dominant culture get involved in the struggle in order to "help" or to take up a cause for other people, or to assuage their own feelings of guilt. Part of privilege is that one can choose to engage in the struggle or not. However, for oppressed peoples the choice is not as simple as being a part of a cause or not, it can be a matter of survival. Do we believe that oppression is a problem for the society as a whole or just a problem for its victims? While racism affects people of color in very

etrimonial ways, racism is a problem for white people because it is white people who need to act to change it. As well, it is good to consider how oppression benefits you and what you may get out of ending oppression, and what you may lose. If you're involved simply to help, get a good internship, or take up a cause, you might be doing yourself and your community a disservice.

7. Consider the difference between charity and solidarity As you do get involved in ending oppression consider not only your intent, but also the effectiveness of your action. Charity is a form of help. Examples of charity include volunteerism (short-term, limited participation in a cause) and philanthropy (donating money to a cause). Consider Martin Luther Kings Jr.'s admonishment: "Philanthropy is commendable, but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice which make philanthropy necessary."

Solidarity is a different sense of involvement. It is a long-term participation in the struggle, understanding the part you play and how the issues affect you personally. As well, solidarity may very well mean not being the center of the solution, but just a small part. It may mean deferring your sense of authority and leadership. It can also mean dropping your own agenda for how change should be achieved. It can be very problematic when the leadership in an organization is people from the dominant culture. When people from the dominant culture define the issues or strategies for oppressed people it can be condescending and ineffective. So, an example of solidarity is being part of community organizing efforts led by people of color, womyn, etc in an active, but non-leadership role. Being in solidarity means seeing how you will benefit from the liberation of others.

7. Don't be afraid to mess up or be to be uncomfortable

This is difficult work and it requires a lot of humility and vulnerability. It is important to realize that we are asking ourselves to challenge things we've believed since we were children. We were brought up with a frame of reference that has inevitable blind spots. We are trying to change behaviors that are well ingrained. We will mess up. Sometimes people will be kind in their response to our follies and sometimes they won't. However, we can be kind to ourselves by getting support from other people and by attending kindly to whatever emotions arise. We can be kind to others by not letting these mess ups lead to give ups. Anyone who has been involved in anti-oppression work probably has one or many stories of being called out on some unskillful behavior. It is part of the process and something we can ultimately be grateful for, even if it is painful as hell in the moment.

8. Make Amends

If you do mess up, or if you recall some instance in which you feel you acted unskillfully, try to make amends. Apologize to your community or to the person/people directly. Realize that in doing so you may or may not get a

positive response from the persons you hurt. Apologizing is not in and of itself the end of the situation. Either way, the best way to make amends might be to continue to be internally introspective and externally active.

9. Don't expect a pat on the back

It is exciting to engage in social justice work. As we begin to change our internal landscape we may feel our self-esteem rise with our integrity. Sometimes our head may get a little big. Some people have experienced a feeling of being one of "the good white people", for example. Don't let this hinder your own self-evaluation and openness to being challenged on your stuff. And don't expect oppressed peoples to acknowledge your internal or external achievements. If you do find yourself wondering why you aren't getting more positive feedback for the work you are doing, it may be a good time to check your intentions. Are you doing the work for yourself and your community or because you are trying to be a good helper, feel less guilty, and/or get the respect of others?

10. Do the work within yourself, your own cultures and your own communities

For people who are in the dominant group it may be very difficult to experience the anger or frustration of oppressed people. The level of emotion may trigger very deep wounds of our own and it can get really uncomfortable, really fast. It is important for us to do our own emotional processing work. It is helpful to be clear about our own relationship to anger and other strong emotions so that we are not defensive or shut down when we experience these emotions with people who have been oppressed.

Part of solidarity is creating active change within the privileged communities. This also creates allies for allies, meaning as an ally, it is important to have support from others who are trying to do the same. This helps keep you in check and gives you a place to explore some of the pain and challenges of this work. For example, as you do a personal inventory it can be good to have another person from your same culture to talk with about these memories. It can be transformative when men get together and talk about ways they have mistreated women or when white people get together and talk about ways that they could have handled racially insensitive remarks differently. Work within your own culture or community may manifest as a monthly support group or discussion group, a caucus or sub-committee within an organization, or a blog devoted to discussing such matters.

For more on being an ally: www.paulkivel.com/articles/guidelinesforbeingstrongwhiteallies.pdf