

Interrupting Racism: A Technique

Halt what's going on: "Wait!" "Hold on!" "Excuse me." "Whoa."

Own your feelings: "I'm really uncomfortable with what just happened." "I'm really uncomfortable with something you just said." "I'm really uncomfortable with what's going on here." "I was really uncomfortable about the conversation we had yesterday."

Name the action as accurately as possible. (Do not put ANY interpretation on it yet. There is a slim chance that you heard it wrong. This step gives them an opportunity to correct your facts.) "You just referred to your sister-in-law as a 'Jewish American Princess.'" "You just said that you don't think people of color should be cast in roles originally written for white actors."

Describe your objection: "'Jewish American Princess' is a hurtful stereotype about Jews. There are spoiled and selfish women of all ethnicities, including gentiles, and there are also spoiled and selfish men. That expression is anti-Semitic and it hurts Jews. It's also sexist." "Almost all of the plays produced in the US today are by and about white people. If you don't practice open casting, you are forcing African American actors to be unemployed. That's discrimination and it's very unfair and very harmful."

* **Listen!** Give the offender a chance to take responsibility for what they said.

Accountability: "I appreciate your apology. Thank you." "I am uncomfortable that you are choosing to defend your use of that expression. I will need to speak to your supervisor (your dean, etc) about this." "This still feels unresolved for me. Not casting people of color for any reason except talent is discriminatory and it hurts actors of color." "I understand that you don't feel that what you said is racist or offensive. I disagree. It is a negative stereotype and stereotypes are harmful." "I don't accept that as a joke. Stereotypes are always harmful."

Taking Responsibility When Confronted

People who experience an oppression are the experts. African Americans know what is racist. Disabled people know what is ableist. Jewish people know what is anti-Semitic. Women know what is sexist. Lesbians know what is homophobic. 99% of the time, when you are confronted, you will be wrong. Probably 80% of the time, you will be absolutely sure that you are not and that the other person is "taking it wrong" and not as evolved as you. That's the way prejudice works. (Duh.)

But keep in mind that you are probably wrong, whether or not you can see it in the moment. What to do? Buy time: Use "I will need to go away and think about this." Odds are very high that you will "get it" in a day, a week, a year. So, save face, save friendships, and save having to call the person up and apologize twice, for saying something insensitive and then for insensitively defending it.

Do . . . take it seriously. Do not insist it was a joke, that you're being misunderstood, that the person confronting is too sensitive. Even if that's what you believe.

Don't . . . make excuses. Your intentions have absolutely nothing to do with the confrontation. LISTEN to the confronter.

Do . . . apologize if you "get it:" "You're right. That was a racist remark. There's no excuse for

This is a short handout from Carolyn Gage's workshop "Interrupting Racism" that outlines strategies for responding to interpersonal racist remarks as well as how to take responsibility when confronted.

it, and I am really sorry I said it. I get how harmful that was (or how painful that was for you to hear).” If you don’t get it, don’t pretend that you do. That’s called lying and will usually result in deepening your prejudice. You can say, “I hear you and I take your concern very seriously. I’m going to have to go away and think about this.”

Do . . . express appreciation for the courage of the confronter. “I appreciate your confronting me. I know that takes courage.” “Thanks for pointing this out. I certainly don’t want to offend people with insensitive remarks.”

Don’t . . . ask the confronter to explain the nature of their objection. They will if they feel like it. If they don’t, don’t ask. Believe it or not, it’s your problem, not theirs. It’s arrogant to expect folks you have offended to have to educate you about their oppression. It’s also lazy. Assume they have had to confront a similar behavior about 20 times already this week. No, they don’t want to explain it to you. And they shouldn’t have to.

This is a short handout from Carolyn Gage’s workshop “Interrupting Racism” that outlines strategies for responding to interpersonal racist remarks as well as how to take responsibility when confronted.