

TEACHING TOLERANCE



Everyday Bigotry: How Do We Respond?

Your brother routinely makes anti-Semitic comments. Your neighbor uses the N-word in casual conversation. Your co-worker ribs you about your Italian surname, asking if you're in the mafia. A classmate insults something by saying, "That's so gay."

And you stand there, in silence, thinking, "What can I say in response to that?" Or you laugh along, uncomfortably. Or, frustrated or angry, you walk away without saying anything, thinking later, "I should have said something."

No agency or organization counts or tracks these moments. They don't qualify as hate crimes, and they rarely make news. That's part of their insidious nature; they happen so often we simply accept them as part of life. Left unchecked, like litter or weeds, they blight the landscape.

Leann Johnson, a multiethnic mother of two, made a Kwanzaa presentation at a public holiday gathering. Afterward, while Johnson was taking down the display, a white woman came up and said, "When I first saw you, I didn't know you were black. You're so smart and pretty."

"I had a flight response," Johnson said. "I thought, 'Something bad has happened; just leave.'" So Johnson stepped away.

Then, she said, "Something boiled up from deep inside, years of stuff, of hearing those kinds of remarks. Plus I have two small children, two little girls, my babies, and I have a responsibility to them."

So Johnson turned, went back to the woman and said, "I don't know if you know how that sounded, but the way it sounded to me is that you think black people cannot be smart or pretty."

The woman stammered, started to rationalize her comment, then stopped. Tears welled in her eyes as she said, "Thank you so much. I have really learned something today. I had no idea how that came out, and what you say makes me understand it better."

Johnson said such moments are rare, but vital. "It is so important to have at least one win once in a while, one thank-you. It makes it that much easier to step out next time, to take a risk and say something."

Fast Facts

- Thirty percent of workers say they've heard colleagues use racial or ethnic slurs in the last 12 months. The same number report hearing sexist comments.
- Twenty-one percent of workers say they've overheard age-related ridicule, and 20% of workers report hearing jabs aimed at sexual orientation.
- One in 10 students say that someone at school has called them a derogatory word related to race, religion, ethnicity, disability, gender, or sexual orientation in the past six months.

"To remain silent and indifferent is the greatest sin of all."

— Elie Wiesel

SPEAK UP: Six Steps

Whatever situation you're in, remember these six steps to help you speak up against everyday bigotry. In any situation, however, assess your safety, both physical and emotional. There is a risk, and that must be acknowledged as you make your own choice to Speak Up!

1. Be Ready. You know another moment like this will happen, so prepare yourself for it. Think of yourself as the one who will speak up. Promise yourself not to remain silent.

"Summon your courage, whatever it takes to get that courage, wherever that source of courage is for you," said Dr. Marsha Houston, chair of the Communication Studies Department at the University of Alabama.

To bolster that courage, have something to say in mind before an incident happens. Open-ended questions often are a good response. "Why do you say that?" "How did you develop that belief?"

2. Identify the Behavior. Sometimes, pointing out the behavior candidly helps someone hear what they're really saying: "Janice, what I hear you saying is that all Mexicans are lazy" (or whatever the slur happens to be). Or, "Janice, you're classifying an entire ethnicity in a derogatory way. Is that what I hear you saying?"

When identifying behavior, however, avoid labeling, name-calling or the use of loaded terms. Describe the behavior; don't label the person.

"If your goal is to communicate, loaded terms get you nowhere," said Dr. K.E. Supriya, associate professor of communications at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and an expert in the role of gender and cultural identity in communication. "If you simply call someone a racist, a wall goes up."

3. Appeal to Principles. If the speaker is someone you have a relationship with—a sister, friend or coworker, for example—call on their higher principles: "Bob, I've always thought of you as a fair-minded person, so it shocks me when I hear you say something that sounds so bigoted."

"Appeal to their better instincts," Houston said. "Remember that people are complex. What they say in one moment is not necessarily an indication of everything they think."

4. Set Limits. You cannot control another person, but you can say, "Don't tell racist jokes in my presence anymore. If you do, I will leave." Or, "My workspace is not a place I allow bigoted remarks to be made. I can't control what you say outside of this space, but here I ask that you respect my wishes." Then follow through.

"The point is to draw a line, to say, 'I don't want you to use that language when I'm around,'" Bob Carolla, spokesman for the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill. "Even if attitudes don't change, by shutting off bad behavior, you are limiting its contagion. Fewer people hear it or experience it."

5. Find an Ally/Be an Ally. When frustrated in your own campaign against everyday bigotry, seek out like-minded people and ask them to support you in whatever ways they can. And don't forget to return the favor: If you aren't the first voice to speak up against everyday bigotry, be the next voice.

"Always speak up, and never be silenced out of fear," said Shane Windmeyer, founder and coordinator of Campus PrideNet and the Lambda 10 Project. "To be an ally, we must lead by example and inspire others to do the same."

6. Be Vigilant. Remember: Change happens slowly. People make small steps, typically, not large ones. Stay prepared, and keep speaking up. Don't risk silence.

"There's a sense of personal disappointment in having not said something when you felt you should have," said Ron Schlittler, acting executive director of the national office of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. Carolla put it this way: "If you don't speak up, you're surrendering part of yourself. You're letting bigotry win."

Everyday Bigotry: How Would You Respond?

These scenarios were developed by the SPLC. They have different contexts (family, work, school, shops, restaurants, or on the street), but they have one thing in common: bigotry against people "other" than they are. Read a situation and decide if you would speak up. If not, why not? If so, role-play how you would do it. Have two people act out the scenario; the rest of the group acts as observers. After you finish the role-play, the observers comment on their concerns and the effectiveness.

1. You are vacationing with your mother and two brothers. One morning, your brother says he wants to give his car "a Jewish car wash," which he describes as "taking soap out when it's raining to wash your car, so you don't waste money on water." He says he learned the phrase from his (your) stepfather.
2. Your young daughter wraps a towel around her head and says she wants to be a terrorist for Halloween — "like that man down the street." The man is a Sikh who wears a turban for religious reasons. What do you tell your daughter?
3. Your mother uses racial and ethnic terminology in casual stories where race and ethnicity are not factors: the Mexican checkout clerk, the black saleswoman. Of course, if the person is white, she never bothers to mention it.
4. The patriarch of the family continually refers to the largest nuts in cans of mixed nuts as "n****r toes." The grown children in the family speak up whenever they hear him use the term, but he persists.
5. Your father says he has nothing against homosexuals, but he says they shouldn't be allowed to lead in a church. You have gay friends at your church. What do you say?
6. Your father and uncle know how much you oppose racist or homophobic "jokes." You've told them that all the time, and they just keep telling "jokes" to make you mad, to push your buttons, and get a reaction. They know you hate it. In the past, you've been so angry you'd cry and leave the house. Lately, you've tried to steel yourself and just not react.
7. Your cousin used to come visit you whenever he was doing business in town. One time he was over and used the N-word, and you said, "I don't use that word," but he still used it a few more times. You finally said, "Don't use that word. If you're going to use that word, I'm going to ask you to find somewhere else to stay." It seems like it was like a game to him, to use the word to see how you'd react.
8. An African American woman is raising her teenage niece. The niece joined the basketball team, came home, and said, "Auntie, there are 12 girls on the team, and six are lesbians."
9. You grew up fairly poor and attend a college that draws students from some very rich families. A wealthy classmate invites you and another classmate out to dinner one night when her family is visiting. It is the fanciest restaurant you've ever been to. During the salad course, the waiter brings a cloth-covered platter with what you later learn are chilled forks. You reach to take the platter out of his hands so you can pass it around the table to the others. Judging from the laughter at the table, this is a major faux pas. You were supposed to just take a fork and let the waiter move to the next person with his tray. You feel ashamed for the rest of the meal and excuse yourself from joining them for some sightseeing afterward. You are reminded of other times you've heard classmates refer to people as "hillbillies" or "trailer trash."
10. A woman who is adopted is still grieving the death of her mother. She is told, "Oh, so that wasn't your real mother who died?" She is so hurt by this she doesn't know what to say.

11. A Chinese-American woman often finds herself asked by friends, "What do Chinese people think about that?"
12. You and your spouse live in New York City and meet your new neighbor shortly after he moves in. The new neighbor opens the conversation with, "You're probably relieved that no one black moved in."
13. Your neighbor informs you she has finally sold her house. In a disapproving voice, she identifies the buyer as "a Chinese or Japanese woman married to a white man."
14. You live in an all-white neighborhood in South Carolina. A couple is being transferred out of state and sells their home to an African-American family. A neighbor confronts them angrily and asks why they sold the house to black people.
15. You get unwanted "joke" emails forwarded by friends and family members. The targets of such emails are innumerable: lesbians and gays, Muslims, Catholics, Jews, people with disabilities, Republicans, Democrats, people across multiple races and ethnicities, blondes, and people who are overweight. It's so horrible that you've once changed your email address and not given the new address to those friends who frequently forward such emails.
16. You are Mexican American. One day, your supervisor takes you aside to deliver what he must think is a compliment. He tells you, "You're a good worker. You're not like the other Mexicans." You just nod and go back to work because you want to keep this job.
17. You receive a racist email "joke" from a co-worker. This is someone you don't know well.
18. At the office, a co-worker makes daily comments about an Italian American woman's heritage. "Are you in the mafia?" "Are you related to the Godfather?" There are only six of you in the office.
19. An African American businesswoman is speaking with a white co-worker. Midway through the conversation, she smiled and says, "You speak so clearly. Have you had diction lessons?"
20. One of your employees constantly makes "jokes" about people being "bipolar" or "going postal" or being "off their meds." You know that one of your other employees — within earshot of these comments — is on medication for depression. How can you stop the bad behavior without revealing confidential information?
21. A co-worker asks you if you want to go out for lunch with a group. "We're going to get Ping-Pong chicken," she says, faking a vaguely Asian accent.
22. A female manager routinely is referred to as the "office mom." No male manager is ever referred to as the office "dad," and male managers expect the female manager to handle office birthdays and other non-job-related tasks. You notice this kind of sexism happening all the time.
23. One of your male coworkers always comments on the physical appearance of female colleagues. "She's such a pretty girl," or "She's a lovely woman." You find these comments inappropriate and have commented to him about them, but his behavior doesn't change.
24. A male employee bakes cookies and brings them to the office. A female employee, arriving later, asks who brought them. She thanks the man, then asks, "Did your wife bake them?"
25. Two co-workers, one of whom is deaf, are asked to meet with an executive from another firm. They go to the other man's office, and a sign-language interpreter accompanies them. The executive chooses to face the interpreter, speaking to him, not looking at or acknowledging the employee who is deaf.

26. In a staff meeting about budget issues, an African American woman hears a white co-worker suggest cost-cutting measures for landscaping: "Why don't we just get the Mexicans to do it?"
27. At your company, a male co-worker comes in one day with a newly pierced ear. Your manager sees the earring and laughingly calls him a "faggot."
28. A white event coordinator working with an African-American client. She says her employees don't get out of the office much because she gives them so much to do. "Yeah, I'm a real slave driver."
29. One of your co-workers has cerebral palsy and uses a cane. At a recent staff meeting, a co-worker criticizes an idea under discussion: "Oh, that is so lame."
30. You are in a doctor's waiting room and notice a Russian-speaking immigrant being treated poorly by the receptionist at the front counter. Do you talk directly to the receptionist? To the office manager?
31. In the grocery store, you notices a cashier treating a non-English-speaking woman badly. Do you talk directly to the cashier? To the manager?
32. Your sister uses a wheelchair. You and she are boarding a plane when the flight attendant says to you, "Will she need help being seated?"
33. A Latino family stops at a fast-food restaurant. A Latina employee greets them at the counter. The dad orders, "*Dos del numero uno y dos del numero cuatro, por favor.*" The clerk responds, "Can you repeat that in English, please?" The dad repeats the order in English, then adds, "But you speak Spanish; you have an accent just like mine." The clerk looks over her shoulder and says, "Yes, I do, but I'm not supposed to speak Spanish here; I could get in trouble with my supervisor." On the drive home, the man's 4-year-old daughter is crying. They pull over to see what's wrong, and the little girl whispers in her mother's ear, in Spanish, "I don't know how to speak a lot of English, and I don't want to get in trouble."
34. You are straight and walking down the street with a gay friend the day after a local Gay Pride event. On the sidewalk, you pass a man who loudly tells a female companion, "There were fags all over the place. I felt like killing them."
35. You are moving to a new city to attend college and are apartment-hunting with your mom. In a restaurant, your mom is making friendly conversation with people at another table. She asks which neighborhoods are good for students. The man at the other table says, "Pretty much all of the neighborhoods in town are fine; we try to keep the n****rs and Mexicans out of the city limits."
36. An 18-year-old Hispanic woman goes to a craft store to spend her birthday money. The manager follows her and asks repeatedly what she is looking for. Other customers, all white, are browsing without being asked such questions. When she protests, she is asked to leave.
37. You notice white store clerks shadowing two African-American shoppers, taking items out of the shoppers' hands and replacing them on the racks, then standing by the dressing room door when one of the women tries on a garment.
38. An African American minister is pulled over while driving home from Sunday service, in full view of many of his parishioners. He is forced to complete a field sobriety test. When he asks why he has been pulled over, he is told simply, "You swerved."
39. You and your kids (9 and 11) are big baseball fans. During the playoffs, an LA Dodgers Latino player, Yuli Gurriel, makes a "slant-eyes" mocking gesture to Asian-born Yu Darvish. What do you say to the kids?

