

What is an Ally?

An ally is a member of the “majority” group who works to end oppression in his or her personal life through support of and as an advocate for the oppressed population.

The following quotes about what it means to be an ally were taken from discussions conducted by Student Allies for Equality at Western Washington University:

- “An ally validates and supports people who are different from themselves.”
- “An ally realizes and questions personal privilege and uses it to benefit people who are oppressed.”
- “An ally examines their own prejudices and is not afraid to look at themselves.”
- “An ally supports the oppressed group’s voice and sense of autonomy.”
- “An ally works with the oppressed group, offering support by being accountable to, but not being responsible for, the oppressed group.”
- “An ally is an advocate by challenging (mis)conceptions when the oppressed group is absent.”
- “Being an ally means: sharing the power, taking a risk, taking responsibility, opening yourself up to the unknown, realizing that you are a part of the solution, leveling the playing field, accepting differences, making allowances, and leading by action.”

Become an Ally

Becoming an ally is a process. Take time to think about the process outlined below and about where you are and where you would like to be.

Step One: Be Aware

Who are you? Understanding your viewpoint and its origins in maleness or femaleness, religion, ethnicity, race, physical and emotional abilities, class, etc., is critical to understanding your relationship to others, to ideas, and to events.

Step Two: Educate Yourself

Learning about others is the next important step in becoming an ally. Challenge yourself to learn about persons, cultures, and groups that you do not identify with. It is only by learning about others that you can stand with and for them in the face of oppression. The knowledge you gain will enable you to be accountable to the persons for whom you are an ally.

Step Three: Gain the Skills

In order to be an effective ally, you need to develop skills to communicate the knowledge you have gained about yourself and others. This may seem frightening at first, since it involves taking steps towards action. Research venues where you can practice the skills needed to become an ally in a safe, non-judgmental environment.

Step Four: Take Action

It is only by participation that we become involved in the struggle to end oppression in our communities. Yes, it is challenging. Yes, it can be frightening. However, if we keep our knowledge, thoughts, skills, and awareness to ourselves, we deprive others not only of our own gifts, but of a life of richness and equality. Share your knowledge.

Being an Ally: Action Ideas and Tips

1. I know when to step back. I make space for the oppressed person/people to speak out, share, lead, and validate one another.
2. I acknowledge that persons from under-represented groups need to take the lead in fighting the oppression that they face. I take direction from and defer to them about how to proceed.
3. I do not expect members of under-represented groups to explain to or educate me.
4. I do not attempt to convince individuals in a marginalized group that I'm on their side. I show support through continuous action. I approach the work I do as support work. I realize it is not my job to call the shots, but to support their struggles as an ally.
5. I remember that members of under-represented groups are survivors (not victims) and have a long history of resistance. I celebrate instances of resistance. I learn and talk about forms of resistance and instances of successful struggle, not just instances of oppression.
6. I speak up when I hear people implying that under-represented groups are powerless or deserving of pity. I remind them that being oppressed does not mean being powerless.
7. I talk to other members of my privileged group about privilege and oppression. I make these conversations part of my daily life.
8. I am able to acknowledge how oppressive patterns operate in practice.
9. I listen to a person from an under-represented group express their concerns and perspectives about community issues and encourage them to take action. I also ask what they want to do and how I can help make that happen.
10. I assume that people in under-represented groups are already communicating in the best and most comfortable way they can.
11. I make the concerns of under-represented groups visible by helping people get in the door.
12. I connect with other allies.
13. I am friends with people from groups with whom I do not personally identify.
14. I treat people as individuals. I don't make one person represent all of an under-represented group.
15. I do not expect gratitude from people in an under-represented group. I remember that being an ally is a matter of choice.
16. I create a comfortable setting. I am conscious of wardrobe, mannerisms, and things used to decorate my living and work environments.
17. I know that an under-represented group may question my motive for being an ally. I know that this doubt is valid.

AGENT RESPONSES TO BEING CALLED ON OPPRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

WAYS TO LEARN

LET GO OF UNPRODUCTIVE EMOTIONAL REACTIONS: I notice and let go of feelings of defensiveness, embarrassment, anger, fear, guilt, or shame that interfere with my ability to listen to what you are saying.

LISTEN: I focus on understanding what you are telling me even though I am probably having many feelings about what you are saying that could interfere with my ability to listen.

SEEK MORE INFORMATION: I ask questions to make sure I understand your reaction. I read. I attend workshops. I talk with other agent group members.

RECEIVE YOUR FEEDBACK ASA GIFT: I understand that when someone offers information so that I can become more conscious of my role in maintaining social injustice it is a gift not to taken lightly. I welcome the information and believe it to my benefit to receive it.

TAKE A NEW PERSPECTIVE: I try to look at the situation from your perspective. I try to understand your perspective by thinking about one of my own target group memberships.
PROBLEM SOLVE: I take responsibility for identifying ways that I might change my actions. I do not assume that you should or will help me.

INTEGRATE NEW BEHAVIOR: I choose different behaviors in the future because I believe it is important for me to do so, not just be because I am afraid of being confronted again.

WAYS TO AVOID LEARNING

DENIAL: I did not say or do anything that was oppressive or offensive. I can't be an oppressor because I am a member of a target group.

DISMISSAL: You are overreacting, being too sensitive, blowing *this* out of proportion.

ATTACK: I say something back to you intended to hurt you or make you angry.

CLAIM IT WAS A JOKE: I insist I was only kidding and the problem is that you have no sense of humor or are taking things too seriously.

EXPLANATION: I try to convince you that you are misinterpreting my actions by explaining and rationalizing how my actions are were not really evidence of prejudice on my part.

GUILT: I am so ashamed that I offended you that all I can focus on is my own distress that you think I am prejudiced. I feel terrible and apologize even if I do not really understand what the problem is. Sometimes I get angry if you don't immediately forgive me and help me to feel better.

SHOCK: I am so surprised by being confronted that I am immobilized. I cannot hear what you have to say and I cannot think about what I want to do.

TRIVIALIZATION: I seek support from other more "friendly" target group members to reassure myself that you are being unreasonable and unfair.

GANG UP: I seek support from other agent group members to reassure myself that you are being unreasonable and unfair.

Ally Checklists

As you read through these statements, consider how they apply to you. Do you practice these things all the time? Only in certain situations? Which ones do you feel comfortable with? Why do you think you are more comfortable doing some of these ally behaviors than doing other ones? Which ones seem most challenging to you? How will you work on the areas that are most difficult for you?

Being a Class Ally

1. I don't assume that it is a working class/working poor/poor person's job to educate me about class issues. I read up on class struggles.
2. I understand that knowledge from books is never as valid as knowledge based on personal life experiences.
3. I understand that a middle class/upper-middle class/rich position is privileged and not normative or average.
4. I don't assume that it is a working class/working poor/poor person's responsibility to tell me their life story. I don't force discourse.
5. I make an effort to use inclusive language, because I understand that education and overly academic language are often inaccessible to working class/working poor/poor people.
6. I realize that class is not a defining marker of intelligence and don't "talk down" to a working class/working poor/poor person.
7. I understand anger and allow space for discourse about my specific privilege and/or moneyed privilege in general.
8. I recognize how classism interacts with and is complicated by other systems of oppression: racism, sexism, ableism, oppression of parents, etc.
9. I engage in anti-classist struggles and seek to build cross-class alliances.
10. I share money when I can.
11. I investigate my own life and how I am classist. I challenge these beliefs and behaviors in myself and my life.
12. I work to make meetings and events accessible by considering where they are held, when they are held, whether or not child care is available, etc.
13. I understand that the right to have/adopt and parent/care for children should not be dependent upon class position or income.
14. I recognize that class does not equal income, but also includes education, geography, job, and many other factors.
15. I respectfully interrupt classist jokes, slurs, comments, or assumptions when I come across them.
16. I offer alternatives and/or accurate information when I hear classist stereotypes or myths.
17. I build and maintain friendships and relationships across class and race lines.
18. I use the words "class" and "classism" in my conversations with people.
19. I acknowledge the class implications of all the decisions that I make.
20. I try not to assume that others have the same level of resources as I do.
21. I support the leadership of poor and working class people.
22. I don't make assumptions about people's intelligence based on their appearance.
23. I am open to talking about my class situation and class of origin.
24. I take care to notice and critically analyze judgments I make about people and look for class elements in those judgments.
25. I take care to notice what clothing I wear and why.
26. I go to activities and events that are outside of my class comfort zone.
27. I support boycotts and strikes.

Ways to be an Ally for Differently-Abled People

When interacting with someone who has a disability that affects learning, intelligence, or brain function...

1. I speak slowly and clearly.
2. I allow the person time to tell me what they want.
3. I stay focused on the person as they respond to me.
4. I rephrase comments or questions when needed for better clarity, rather than repeating the same words over and over.

When interacting with someone who uses a wheelchair...

1. I ensure that my organization holds meeting in ramped buildings, with entrances and bathrooms stalls at least 32 inches wide.
2. I rearrange furniture to ensure that rooms are set up with wide aisles and that spaces are left for wheelchairs among the other chairs.
3. I don't push, lean on, or hold their wheelchair unless asked to.
4. I try to put myself at eye-level when possible.
5. I offer to share where wheelchair accessible rest rooms, telephones, water fountains, etc are located.
6. I consider distance, weather conditions, and obstacles (curbs, stairs, steep hills) when giving directions.

When interacting with someone who is deaf, uses a hearing aid, or has trouble hearing...

1. I let the person take the lead in establishing the mode of communication.
2. At meetings or events, I arrange for a sign language interpreter to be present when needed.
3. In conversations, I work to ensure that only one person is speaking at a time, to facilitate communication between hearing people and people with hearing difficulties.
4. If someone with a hearing impairment is present, I face them when speaking to them and remember to move my lips naturally. I have a pencil and paper ready in case we get stuck.
5. I speak slowly and clearly.

When interacting with someone who has a disability that affects speech...

1. If I can't understand what someone is saying, I tell them what I heard and then ask them to repeat or re-phrase, or offer them a pen and paper.
2. I pay attention, am patient, and wait for them to finish, without cutting them off.
3. I am prepared to use many different techniques, modes, and devices for communication.

When interacting with someone who has a disability that affects vision...

1. I make sure written or visual materials are available on tape for people in my organization. If this is not possible, I am prepared to have written materials read aloud.
2. When greeting someone, I identify myself and introduce others who are present.
3. When I leave, I announce that I am leaving.
4. When asked to guide someone, I allow them to take my arm, then walk slightly ahead. I don't push or pull them. I point out doors, stairs, curbs, etc as we approach them.
5. As I enter a room with a person, I describe the layout, and am specific about the location of objects.
6. I don't pet or distract guide dogs unless given permission to do so.

Other things I consider...

1. I plan and facilitate meetings with an effort to avoid draining people's bodies and spirits by providing food (or snack breaks), adhering to time limits, and taking breaks frequently.
2. When planning events or meetings, I ask people about allergies, sensitivities to chemicals, scents, animals, etc.
3. I recognize that I can't always see someone's disability.
4. I avoid asking personal questions about someone's disability unless necessary.
5. If I offer assistance to someone, I wait until that offer is accepted. Then I listen or ask for specific instructions.
6. I refer to someone's disability only when necessary and appropriate.
7. I use people first language. (I say "the person who is blind" instead of "the blind person.")
8. I acknowledge and accept mistakes that I make and offer an apology.
9. I keep a sense of humor and willingness to communicate.

Getting Past Ageism

1. Identify the myths and mis-information.

Recognize the myths about aging and negative attitudes about older adults. Start challenging the myths. Challenge the language.

There are many erroneous beliefs in our society - e.g. that older adults' lives are less valuable and older adults are less deserving of having their rights respected; that older adults feel emotional pain less or do not have sexual feelings; or that older adults are largely responsible for growing health care or other social costs.

2. Go beyond the stereotypes of aging.

Recognize that a label like "elderly" or "seniors" tells us little about what to expect from the person. These labels do not tell us whether the person is kind or uncaring, healthy or with diminishing health, mentally capable or mentally incapable, a reliable or an unreliable worker or volunteer. Labels do not tell us about the person's capacity for friendship or creativity or accomplishment.

Address ageism by highlighting older adults' individual, collective, and lifelong contributions to our society.

3. Learn more about aging.

Recognize ageism for what it is. The better informed we are about aging and what to expect, the better we are able to evaluate and resist many of the inaccurate and negative stereotypes of aging. This will help us better understand which differences are relevant in aging, and which are not.

4. Learn more about ageism and discrimination.

It is very common for older adults to face discrimination in housing, health, and other key services. They may be treated as burdens on services, excluded from or simply refused admission to services. Learn to recognize when "neutral policies" aren't "neutral". Also recognize how ageism intersects with other "isms," such as sexism or racism.

5. Listen to seniors who have experienced ageism.

They are in the best position to tell us how ageism affects their lives.

6. Monitor media and respond to ageist material.

Changing the typically negative ways in which older adults are portrayed in news programs, commercials, films and television shows that reach millions of people on a daily basis is necessary if ageism is to be reduced. Write a letter to or e-mail the editor, TV sponsor or movie producer.

7. Speak up about ageism.

When someone you know uses ageist language or images, tactfully let them know about the inaccuracy. Educate them about the correct meaning.

When someone disparages a senior, tells a joke that ridicules them, or makes disrespectful comments about an older person, we can let them know that this is hurtful and that as seniors or advocates we find the comments offensive and harmful.

8. Watch your own language.

Most of us, including health professionals, health advocates and consumers, use terms and expressions that may perpetuate ageism. We depersonalize older adults by referring to them generically as "the elderly" or "our seniors".

9. Talk openly about aging issues and ageism.

The more ageism and age discrimination remain hidden, the more people believe it is acceptable to act this way.

Show and recognize the heterogeneity of seniors. Let others see real older people - people who are resourceful, articulate and creative, who are familiar as valued friends or coworkers. Also include older adults who have conditions that may limit their abilities in some ways; they are not limited in other ways. People who do not fit the stereotype are a powerful way to fight ageism.

10. Build intergenerational bridges to promote better understanding.

Ageism often builds in the context of ignorance. The more generations realize they are connected to each other throughout the lifespan and affect each others' wellbeing, the greater the opportunities for reducing negative attitudes against young and old, alike.

11. Provide support for organizations that address ageism.

There are a number of organizations that advocate for better treatment and greater acceptance of older adults. Their influence and effectiveness depends, to some extent, on their membership size and the adequacy of their finances. Join. Be involved. Be part of a positive solution.

Source: <http://www.cnpea.ca/ageism.htm>

Tips on Being a Male Ally

1. I understand that empowerment of non-male identified people does not threaten my strength as a man.
2. I am willing and able to call other men out on their actions, words, and issues.
3. I model positive behavior for my friends and other men by setting an example.
4. I practice listening to women and non-male identified people and their realities without trying to fix the problem myself.
5. I work on coming to a place where I am not struggling with my manhood, and do not need to prove my masculinity to others.
6. I am present at meetings to make sure male privilege and gender oppression are part of the discussion.
7. I demonstrate knowledge and awareness of the issues of gender oppression.
8. I use the language and political worldview of gender equality.
9. I continually educate myself and others about gender oppression.
10. I recognize my own limitations as a male identified person doing anti-sexist work.
11. I raise issues about gender oppression over and over, both in public and in private.
12. I can identify sexism and gender oppression as it is happening.
13. I can strategize and work in coalition with others to advance anti-sexist work.
14. I attend to group dynamics to ensure the inclusion of people of color.
15. I support and validate the comments and actions of non-male identified people and other allies. (But not in a paternalistic manner!)
16. I strive to share power with women and other non-male identified people.
17. I take a personal interest in the lives and welfare of individual non-male identified people.
18. I listen carefully so that I am more likely to understand the needs of non-male identified people.
19. I can adopt and articulate the point of view of non-male identified people when it may be helpful.
20. I can accept and encourage leadership from non-male identified people.
21. I understand that non-male identified people often have valid experiences that cause them to feel distrustful, wary, or angry at men. I do not take it as a personal attack. Nor do I try to make them feel guilty for feeling these things about men. I remember that "it's not all about me."
22. I recognize that patriarchy has created a lot of internalized oppression in non-male identified people. Even if non-male identified people express sexist views about other non-male identified people, I realize it does not make it alright for me to act in a sexist way.
23. I recognize that patriarchy and male privilege also involve domination and oppression of children. I know that being a male ally applies to children as well, because young children often suffer their first experiences of oppression due to patriarchal domination in households.
24. I realize that men also experience patriarchal violence, including sexual assault. I know that being a male ally means recognizing the oppression that men perpetrate on others, including other men.

Ways to be a Straight Ally

1. I take the time to examine and understand my own personal feelings around LGBT issues.
2. I understand why I feel it is important to be an ally.
3. I understand how heterosexism and homophobia affect both LGBT people and straight people.
4. I am aware of my socialization, prejudices, and privileges.
5. I take responsibility for educating myself by attending LGBT events, attending or renting films featuring LGBT characters or issues, talking to LGBT people, reading about LGBT issues, etc.
6. I notice my heterosexist language and work to change it. (I use partner instead of boy/girlfriend, and use neutral pronouns.)
7. I talk with friends informally and openly about LGBT events or issues in the new.
8. I critically consider and analyze media presentations of LGBT issues and people and call, email, or write the appropriate parties with complaints, suggestions, or praise.
9. I don't "out" people unless given permission to do so.
10. I ask about things and issues I don't understand. I ask such questions at an appropriate time and in a respectful and non-judgmental way.
11. I risk discomfort and take risks so that I can learn and grow.
12. I am comfortable saying, and do say, the words lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual and queer aloud and in conversation.
13. I don't assume everyone is heterosexual.
14. I don't ridicule people for non-traditional gender behaviors.
15. I challenge homophobia and heterosexist jokes and comments from others.
16. I don't wait for an LGBT person to confront heterosexism; I do it myself.
17. I provide support to LGBT individuals who are targeted or are subjects of heterosexist or homophobic jokes, slurs, comments, or assumptions, either publicly or privately.
18. I provide correct information when I hear myths and misperceptions about LGBT people.
19. I support non-discrimination policies and same-sex domestic partner benefits.

Ways to be an Ally for Trans People

1. I use the right pronouns. When I am unsure, I ask.
2. I think about what, if anything, makes me feel uncomfortable and why. I work to expand my comfort boundaries.
3. I don't ask trans people what their "real" (birth) name is.
4. I do ask trans people when and where it is safe to use their chosen name and pronouns so that I do not accidentally "out" them around people to whom they are not yet ready to come out, or in a situation that is unsafe for them.
5. I don't out a trans person. If they are living as a woman, I refer to them as a woman, rather than a trans woman.
6. If I know the birth name of a trans person, I do not tell it to people without their given consent.
7. I use terms like "trans/non-trans" and "female/male assigned at birth" instead of "real woman/man" and "born as a female/male."
8. I don't confuse gender with sexual preference, and realize that trans people can be straight, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, etc.
9. I take responsibility for educating myself on trans issues, and do not ask transpeople to educate me.
10. I don't ask trans people about their bodies, how they have sex, if they have a penis/vagina, etc.
11. I don't ask about a person's surgery or hormone status.
12. I don't assume that the only way to transition is through hormones or surgery.
13. I recognize that transwomen deal with sexism in a real way, as well as transphobia.
14. I don't assume transmen are exempt from male privilege because of a female past.
15. I recognize that transwomen deserve access to "women-only" spaces, programs, and shelters.
16. I don't assume that all trans people identify as either "man" or "woman".
17. I recognize my privileges and prejudices as a normatively gendered person.
18. I listen when a transperson wants to talk to me about their experiences. I do not barrage them with theory, judgments, or beliefs. I listen.
19. I talk openly about trans issues and rights. I engage people in discussion and share information and knowledge.
20. I call out stereotypes and assumptions and provide information when possible.
21. I provide resources to trans and non-trans people.
22. I respect and support trans people in their lives and choices.
23. I use gender-neutral pronouns, (they/them/their) for all people, not just trans people.

Checklist for White Allies Against Racism

How often do you behave as an ally to people of color?

Adapted from notes from John Raible: "I devised this checklist after thinking, as a person of color, about the white people I know with whom I have developed some degree of trust. I wanted to articulate the specific behaviors I see them engaging in which lead me to appreciate their actions on behalf of students of color and against racism in general."

Part 1

1. I am present at meetings to make sure anti-racism is part of the discussion.
2. I demonstrate knowledge and awareness of the issues of racism.
3. I use the language and political worldview of anti-racism.
4. I continually educate myself and others about racism.
5. I recognize my own limitations as a white person doing anti-racist work.
6. I raise issues about racism over and over, both in public and in private.
7. I realize "it's not about me." I can be objective and avoid over-personalizing issues that people of color raise.
8. I can identify racism as it is happening.
9. I can strategize and work in coalition with others to advance anti-racist work.
10. I attend to group dynamics to ensure the inclusion of people of color.
11. I support and validate the comments and actions of people of color and other allies. (But not in a paternalistic manner!)
12. I strive to share power with people of color.
13. I take a personal interest in the lives and welfare of individual people of color.
14. I use my privilege to communicate information from the dominant group to people of color.
15. I hold high expectations for people of color.
16. I reach out to initiate contact with people of color.
17. I listen carefully so that I am more likely to understand the needs of people of color.
18. I can adopt and articulate a person of color's point of view when it may be helpful.
19. I can accept leadership from people of color.

Part II (Includes the characteristics in Part 1)

1. I work side-by-side with people of color on tasks, projects, and actions.
2. I can debrief with people of color to give and receive "reality checks" and affirmations after meetings, events, and actions.
3. I readily understand—with no explanations necessary—a person of color's position or perception.
4. I have joking relationships with individual people of color.
5. I can vent with and be present for people of color when they need to vent feelings about racism.
6. I debate issues with people of color and take their ideas seriously.
7. I take risks in relating to people of color and take their ideas seriously.
8. I demonstrate shared values with people of color, for example, impatience with the rate of change, anger and injustice, etc.

9. I know the private lives and families of friends who are people of color.
10. I can relax and socialize and be at ease with people of color.

Part III - The following are some problematic areas where white people seem to get stuck. Do they apply to you?

1. I am not clear on the words people of color prefer to use to identify themselves.
2. When people of color point out racism as it is happening, I feel personally attacked.
3. I rely on people of color for education about my own (& institutional) racism.
4. I use meetings and organizing time to establish my anti-racist credentials.
5. It is important to me to point out examples of "reverse racism" when I see them.
6. I have been told I act in a racist manner without knowing it, but I think I'm being an ally.
7. I speak for people of color and attempt to explain their positions.
8. I focus on mediating between people of color for other whites.
9. I see my role as interpreting the behavior of people of color for other whites.
10. I prefer to spend anti-racist time & energy dealing with my personal feelings and issues rather than moving the anti-racist agenda forward.
11. I intellectualize about the struggle rather than live it daily.
12. I wait for people of color to raise white people's awareness.
13. I know well fewer than five individual peers who are people of color.

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Source: <http://web.cortland.edu/russellk/courses/hdouts/raible.htm>