



## A Crash Course In Confronting Bias Behavior

By Dr. Maura Cullen

"Did you hear the joke of the Jew and the lesbian?".....

Sound familiar? When it comes to confronting biased or prejudicial jokes and behaviors, we don't always know what to do. Perhaps we may feel we don't have enough information to successfully intervene with diversity facts and figures in order to win the debate which is likely to ensue. Or we are so upset or shocked at what has just taken place that we miss the moment to speak up. For most of us, the entire situation makes us feel uncomfortable.

What follows are a few ways to respond to people making offensive remarks? Some of these interventions are more passive than others. Which one you chose may be a result of your circumstances, the who/what/where/when factors that influence much of what we do.

**Walk Away:** Say "excuse me" walk away from the situation. This is best utilized when we want to make a quick statement without engaging the person. This is especially effective in a group setting when people are making bigoted jokes or remarks. We may feel we don't have enough knowledge to confront the situation or we may not feel safe by intervening. Perhaps it is a boss making the remark and you don't want to lose your job or the promotion. Or it's a family member and you don't want to rock the boat. This is a low risk way to make a statement as people will notice you have left the conversation and wonder what is wrong.

**Interrupt:** Listening to such harmful or hateful statements can evoke strong reactions in us. By interrupting their comments we can stop the behavior and redirect the conversation. To avoid erupting, we might have to disengage from the person or group. Saying things like, "that's not appropriate", "I don't think that's funny", "that's not nice" or "I don't agree" can be powerful course of action.

**Educate:** Being placed in the role of educator is not always an easy place to be. In reality, this is exactly what has to be done at times to improve the knowledge and awareness level of others. I know this first-hand because much of my learning unfortunately has been on the backs of people of color which is very common for white people and replicates the dynamics of oppression. This is true of every group of people who are oppressed. Women are too often put into a position of educating men about sexism, gay folks educate straight folks about hetero sexism and on it goes. But it takes a terrible toll on people who have to do the educating. It gets tiring and frustrating to be placed in the position of being the educator or 'spokesperson' for your group.

Some days you may not want play the role of educator; you may simply want to live your life as others do, without explanation. However, this situation puts you in a double bind. By not intervening you lose the opportunity to challenge assumptions. Yet intervening may place you at risk personally or professionally.

**Engage:** Engaging in conversation with someone is different than being the educator. When you are taking on the role of educator most of the information is going in one direction, from you to the other person and the burden is not shared. However, when you engage a person, those dynamics shift considerably. The flow is now coming from the other person, the one who just said the offensive comment. Your role becomes much like that of an interviewer, asking them questions about their experience and how they arrived at the perspectives they hold. Soliciting information from them serves two important functions. First, the burden of conversation is placed upon them. They have to explain their position and ignorance, providing you insight and a better understanding of why they believe what they do. Second, it provides you with the opportunity to ask questions that will challenge their perspective and perhaps will leave them questioning their own behavior.

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Just remember that the measure of a successful intervention is not that the other person's attitudes and beliefs are changed, for we have no control over that outcome. The success comes in speaking our truth.

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