Out of your comfort zone: Allyship as a self-inventory and constant improvement process

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Definition of Allyship

- Allyship is a sincere commitment by a privileged person to offer ongoing support to individuals, groups, or organizations that are excluded from privilege. Allies take direction from the excluded group about the form(s) that support should take. Allies understand that exclusion and oppression is harmful to all of society.1,2,3
- Allyship requires unlearning the beliefs, cognitive and/or affective responses and behaviors embedded in the privileged status.

Social oppression

- We follow Johnson’s definition of Social Oppression as “a concept that describes a relationship between groups or categories of people in which a dominant group benefits from the systematic abuse, exploitation, and injustice directed toward a subordinate group.” 4

Privilege

- The unearned benefits that some enjoy simply by having a specific social identity or membership.2

What makes a good Ally

- Commitment to continual growth. Being an ally is a process, not an identity.1,2,5
- Listen, Listen, Listen. Listen and truly hear the experiences of the non-dominant group without judgement.6
- Internalized issues must be worked through on your own. Do not expect members of the non-dominant group to support you through your internal exploration.7
- Consistently ask yourself 1) what it means to have privilege and 2) if you would be perceived differently if you were a member of the non-dominant group.1
- Speak out when you identify that power and privilege is perpetuating oppression.1
- Use mistakes as an opportunity to grow rather than an excuse for inaction.1
- Share the lead with non-dominant group members while working towards social justice change.1,3
- Respect boundaries.2
- Engage and inspire members of the same dominant group as you to work towards ending oppressive behaviors and attitudes.3
- Speak in public only if members of the oppressed group have asked you to speak. Only Speak from your point of view - you are not the expert.3

Common mistakes made by allies

- Being motivated by feelings of guilt. Guilt is self-serving and does not promote action.1
- Expecting persons of the non-dominant group to educate you. Listen and be honored when someone wants to share their experiences with you but do not expect a person to teach you about oppression by telling you painful and personal stories.2,5
- Wanting to be the spokes person for a non-dominant group. An ally turns the spotlight off of them self and creates a space where a person who is typically marginalized and ignored can speak freely.2
- Wanting emotional support about the struggles of fighting oppression from a member of the non-dominant group. Allies should seek support from other allies, do not ask members of the non-dominant group to provide you with the emotional support needed to continue to fight against oppression.5
- Wanting gratitude from the non-dominant group. When you find yourself feeling under recognized and underappreciated it is a good time to reflect on your intentions.3
- Talking about the experiences of the oppressed group. This is the role of those who have experienced oppression, as an ally you can share the journey of becoming an ally and your experiences of learning about your own privilege. This can often be helpful in guiding others in exploring their own beliefs, attitudes and behaviors.

For those with privilege, the goal is to “become comfortable with the uncomfortable and uncomfortable with the too-comfortable.”

- Frances E. Kendall, Ph.D.1, quoting David Tutu

Developmental Stages of Allyship 9, 10

STAGE ONE Understand privilege, how it works in your life and the impact that privilege has on the non-dominant group.
STAGE TWO Explore and practice ally behaviors including obtaining feedback from the non-dominant group.
STAGE THREE Educate, inspire and support the growth of dominant group members.
STAGE FOUR Maintain and uphold ally responsibilities (Figure 1).

The Bad Ally Quiz

- Julie Pagano created the “The Bad Ally Quiz” 2 as a tongue-in-cheek way to remind us all that even people with the best of intentions can be ineffectual or even un-helpful allies. While conscientious allies will be surprised at the list’s seemingly outrageous actions, the author describes it as a list of acts that she and her colleagues have “repeatedly” seen from so-called allies.

- We have copies of the Bad Ally Quiz available for our audience; we hope you will answer the questions to inventory your strengths and weaknesses, compute your score, and reflect on how you can be a better ally for people who are systematically oppressed.

References