

## Being an Ally

By Tami, originally published at [What Tami Said](#)

Allies are important to any equality movement. It does not help people of color if we are the only ones who understand racism and how it still exists in society. It does not help women if we are the only ones that believe we deserve equal treatment. This is especially true considering the ways that women and people of color have been kept from places of power. The battles are ours to fight, and we can win them, but we *need* allies.

What does it mean to be allied? The dictionary definition is to be joined in a group to advance common interests or causes. And what does this joining require? I think mutual respect, shared activism and adherence to mutual goals and objectives. Alliances are by nature two-sided affairs. Both sides bear the responsibility of maintaining the relationship. And this isn't easy. I have witnessed too many battles between members of marginalized groups and their professed allies to think otherwise. The disagreements are often raw, emotional and ultimately unsatisfying. Sometimes, I think we expect too much of our allies. Sometimes the privileged are too confident in their roles as allies and too slow to examine their own biases. As enlightened about race or gender a person may be, we are *all* products of a racist and sexist society. To expect *any* person, no matter how good-intentioned, to *never* reveal a racial or gender bias is to invite disappointment. If members of marginalized groups want to work with allies, we have to know that they will fail us sometimes. Our allies have to know that they will fail.

And what do we do when this happens—when allies fail? How can we address mistakes, while preserving relationships and maintaining the power that comes through alliances with people outside of our group? How do I think an ally should respond when their bias or privilege is called out? How do I think marginalized groups should handle the mistakes allies make?

This is the first of two posts on maintaining alliances in the face of failure. Today, I will tackle the responsibilities of anti-racist and feminist allies. What should an ally do when he or she has made an unwitting show of prejudice or privilege?

**Listen.** Good relationship habits 101—listen to the person(s) that you have harmed. It may be helpful to repeat what you understand the grievance to be in order to demonstrate that you are making an effort to understand. Before you speak, *think* about what is being said. Try to put aside your ego (hard as that is) and examine the “offense.” Can you see your privilege peeking through? Have you uncovered a hidden bias? Even if your actions were unintentional, can you see how they could be misconstrued?

**Don't defend.** Everyone wants to believe they have their prejudices in check. And when you are generally diligent about examining your biases and privilege, and you have good intentions, hearing that you have failed can feel like a slap. It is easy to become defensive, rattling explanations and defenses rather than truly listening to the person who is offended. And you may feel angry: “After all the ways I've proven myself, how could anyone think I am (racist,

sexist, etc.).” Resist the urge to defend yourself at first. This doesn’t mean you need be endlessly berated or that the person who you have offended is right. It simply means that you can’t listen and hear where another person is coming from if you are talking.

**Allow us our anger.** It isn’t easy being a member of a marginalized group. For instance, I have written before about the [dull aches of racism](#). I have also written about how members of marginalized groups are expected to hold their tongues in the face of mistreatment—[to be the “bigger persons.”](#) What may seem like a very small deal to you, to us may be yet another wearying and soul-destroying slight. Any human being has a right to be angry about injustice. Again, this does not mean that we have the right to dehumanize or insult you. It is not an ally’s job to be endlessly flogged and called to account for the sins of all society. But marginalized people *do* have a right to be pissed off and to show it.

**Apologize.** If you understand and agree that you have committed an offense, apologize. No “I’m sorry, but...” No need to explain the whys and wherefores or attempt to minimize. Just say, “I’m sorry. I was wrong and I should have known better.” Period. Own your mistake. Now, I am not suggesting that you apologize for something you didn’t do or don’t think you’ve done. If, after truly listening, you believe you have been misunderstood...well, that situation is more difficult. That I am a black woman does not automatically mean that I am always right in identifying a white person’s race bias or a man’s gender bias. There is a way to acknowledge what another person is feeling, even if you ultimately don’t apologize. But know that if you’re a guy on a womanist Web site, for example, and multiple women tell you that you are being a sexist asshole, you probably need to check yourself.

**(If Possible) Correct.** If what you have done can be undone, do it immediately.

**Educate yourself.** The best way to come to understand how, say, “racism” works, to identify your own biases and to learn the language of the movement, is to get smart about racial prejudice and privilege, as well as other cultures. Don’t rely on people of color to do your work for you. As allies, we will naturally share some information with you, teach a little. But teaching is not our responsibility. Read the books by important thinkers on race. Note new study results. Pay attention to pop culture, media and art beyond the mainstream. Seek a diverse group of friends. Lurk on popular anti-racist blogs. Get involved offline. And again, listen...listen...listen. This is the best way to avoid missteps and to recover when you fail. Your education is *your responsibility*.

[Editor's note: There is nothing that annoys me more...and you can find this often on feminist blogs when the issue of race comes up...than when someone begins a comment by saying, "We'll, I'm just a clueless white woman, but..." To this, I say..."No." First, the constituencies of most of the popular feminist blogs prove themselves to be far from clueless on other topics. They talk of being PhDs and scientists and teachers and journalists. These are smart women. What this statement really means is, "I have the privilege of not having to educate myself on this issue, so I'm going to make a cutesy disclaimer before I speak in case I say something wildly

offensive." That's a cop out. It's an attempt to get around owning your mistakes. And it demeans me and you. If you think you really are "clueless," do something about it.]

**Reaffirm your commitment.** Proof that you are a true ally to a cause—whatever the cause is—is that you slog through and keep going, even through rough patches and arguments. Your continued presence post-mistake, whether on a feminist blog or in a local grassroots anti-racist organization, is a demonstration of your commitment.

## Being an Ally, Pt. 2

What does it mean to be allied? The dictionary definition is to be joined in a group to advance common interests or causes. And what does this joining require? I think mutual respect, shared activism and adherence to mutual goals and objectives. Alliances are by nature two-sided affairs. Both sides bear the responsibility of maintaining the relationship. And this isn't easy. I have witnessed too many battles between members of marginalized groups and their professed allies to think otherwise. The disagreements are often raw, emotional and ultimately unsatisfying. Sometimes, I think we expect too much of our allies. Sometimes the privileged are too confident in their roles as allies and too slow to examine their own biases. As enlightened about race or gender a person may be, we are *all* products of a racist and sexist society. To expect *any* person, no matter how good-intentioned, to *never* reveal a racial or gender bias is to invite disappointment. If members of marginalized groups want to work with allies, we have to know that they will fail us sometimes. Our allies have to know that they will fail.

In that post, I tackled the responsibilities of anti-racist and feminist allies. What should an ally do when he or she has made an unwitting show of prejudice or privilege? Today, I want to talk about the responsibilities of marginalized people who want to work with allies. "Responsibilities of marginalized people" ...already I am hesitant to speak about allied relationships this way.

First, marginalized people are the *owners* of the anti-racist and feminist/womanist movements. The outcomes of the movement are about *our* humanity, *our* treatment, *our* futures, *our* children. Our fight is based not on empathy, but lived reality. Yes, racism and sexism ultimately effect *everyone*, no matter their race or gender. But, for instance, women involved in the feminist movement feel the urgency for change much more strongly than our male allies. We are more invested, I think. I say this not as a slight against men. It is the rare human being who is not most invested in things that effect them directly.

Second, marginalized people, like POC, have historically been oppressed. As a result, we adapt to living in a society that does not treat us as equals and sees us as "other." We try to conform. We [code switch](#). We hide our culture. We change our physicality to match that of the majority culture. We hold our tongues in the face of the everyday [dull aches of racism](#). We do this every day, both consciously and unconsciously.

It does not seem right, then, that historically oppressed people, while working within our own safe spaces in movements for our own liberation, have some *responsibility* to the feelings of

privileged people—the historic oppressors—even those who call themselves allies. Haven't we earned a permanent high ground through centuries of mistreatment? Surely we don't have to make gentle our words, hide our anger, [wear the mask](#) (TM Paul Laurence Dunbar) even while fighting for our own equality. Do feminists have a responsibility for maintaining relationships with men? Do anti-racist people of color have a responsibility for maintaining relationships for white people?

If we want them as allies...yes.

We have a responsibility to treat our allies with respect and humanity. It is the same responsibility that every person has to another. This notion of human regard is the very foundation of equality movements. We cannot demand justice while mirroring injustice. We definitely should not feel a need to "wear the mask" in our own safe spaces in order to make privileged people more comfortable. But we can act with compassion. When we do not, we fail at maintaining alliances. And allied relationships are too important to lose.

Allies are important to any equality movement. It does not help people of color if we are the only ones who understand racism and how it still exists in society. It does not help women if we are the only ones that believe we deserve equal treatment. This is especially true considering the ways that women and people of color have been kept from places of power. The battles are ours to fight, and we can win them, but we *need* allies.

So how should marginalized people navigate allied relationships?

**Listen.** It is no surprise that this was the first "rule" in last week's post, too. Listening is part of the foundation for all interpersonal relationships.

**Don't generalize.** Avoid using language that implies that all members of a group are the same and inherently bad. This kind of talk is dehumanizing no matter who it comes from. It is one thing, I think, to discuss the ways that our culture can breed aggressiveness and violence into men; it is another to speak in a way that brands all men violent predators. It is a) a gross exaggeration and b) certainly alienating to any man who calls himself a feminist and works to support women's causes.

**Call people on their own shit, not everyone's shit.** It does no good to give allies a pass on their prejudices. Consenting to being an ally and joining a marginalized group as a privileged person means committing to examining yourself and to having other people examine you, too. This is one way that good allies gain our trust. They unite with us, knowing that doing so means laying their imperfect selves bare. In the case of anti-racist white allies, it means knowing that, no matter how vigilant you are, one day, you are going to say or do something racially insensitive or ignorant, because you are human. And when you make that mistake, the POC you hope to support will be angry and hurt and they will call you on it. And it will be uncomfortable. And it will be easier to disappear from the blog or the local anti-racist group or the friendship. But if you walk away, you prove yourself uncommitted, so hopefully you stay and suck it up and learn

and do better the next time. Doing that—staying when things get uncomfortable—takes strength of character and it is not easy. As a person of color working with white allies, I think I must acknowledge this and respect it. And while I have no fear of calling allies on their prejudices, I must take care not to hold them responsible for more than their *own* privilege and their *own* racial bias. Allies cannot be stand-ins for a larger racist society.

**Don't be a bully.** Marginalized people have a right to our anger and disgust at injustice. We do not have a right to browbeat our supposed allies. Alliances need to be based on mutual respect to work effectively. An environment where the “in group” is always angry and right and the “out group” is always prostrate, sorry, cowering and wallowing in guilt is unhealthy and unproductive in achieving the goals of equality work.

**Be willing to teach sometimes.** Understand. It is not the *obligation* of marginalized people to teach. We shouldn't *have* to teach. Education is wasted on those who don't wish to learn. But offering a hand to an ally who has proven themselves a friend and demonstrated a willingness to educate themselves is a smart thing to do. It strengthens relationships and ultimately helps us move closer to the goal of having more people “get it” when it comes to “isms,” biases and privilege.

There is a climate I have noticed in some spaces—mostly online—where even the most rare and gently-phrased question from the most dedicated ally is met with charges of “Privilege!” “It's not my job to educate YOU!” “Derail!” “Educate yourself!” I understand the principle behind this reaction, yet sometimes the execution seems both uncharitable and ultimately not helpful. If I want the majority culture to “get it” when it comes to racism and privilege, it seems nonsensical to refuse to help even proven allies on their journey sometimes.

**Forgive.** When they hurt us, we generally give some slack to our friends, family and others with whom we have formed important bonds. This is particularly true if the hurt is unintentional. We get angry. We get sad. We get disappointed. But when someone has previously demonstrated their support and regard, and when they have sought our forgiveness, we generally find a way to get past it. So, too, I think it should be with allied relationships. The seeking forgiveness part is crucial here. Forgiveness comes after a person owns, apologizes and makes right their mistake. Once that happens, the slate should be cleared. Relationships break easily under the weight of past hurts never forgiven. One hurt by a friend does not an enemy make. One moment of privilege or bias from an anti-racist ally does not a racist make, either.

**Know when to walk away.** Everyone who claims ally status isn't ready to be an ally. It's as simple as that. Someone who is unwilling to examine their own privilege, who is unwilling to educate themselves, who constantly makes excuses for bias and plays “devil's advocate” too passionately, whose slip ups are too frequent and moments of advocacy too few, perhaps is not the best ally. One can only forgive so much. It is okay to cut your losses, save your sanity and move on when an alliance isn't working.