

# Examples of How to Respond to Everyday Bigotry

## #1 What Can I Do Among Family?

Question: How to speak up to the people closest to you, those you love the most, whether in response to a single instance or an ongoing pattern.

Response: Appealing to shared values can be a way to begin discussions at home or with relatives. Try saying, "Our family is too important to let bigotry tear it apart." Or, "Our family has always stood for fairness, and the comments you're making are terribly unfair." Or, simply, "Is this what our family stands for?"

## #2 What Can I Do About Joking In-Laws?

A woman's father-in-law routinely tells racist "jokes" at family gatherings. "It made me very uncomfortable," she writes.

### **\*Describe your family's values**

Explain why that isn't the case in your home; explain that principles like tolerance and respect for others guide your immediate family's interactions and attitudes.

### **\*Set limits**

### **\*Follow through**

## #3 What Can I Do About Impressionable Children?

A woman's young son tells a racist "joke" at dinner that he had heard on the playground earlier that day.

### **\*Focus on empathy**

"What makes that 'joke' funny?" Guide the conversation toward empathy and respect: "How do you think our neighbor would feel if he heard you call him a terrorist?"

### **\*Expand horizons**

Create opportunities for children to spend time with and learn about people who are different from themselves.

### **\*Be a role model**

Be conscious of your own dealings with others.

## #4 What Can I Do About Parental Attitudes?

My mother uses racial and ethnic terminology—the Mexican checkout clerk, the black saleslady—in casual stories in which race and ethnicity are not factors.

### **\*Speak up without 'talking back'**

Repeat information, removing unnecessary racial or ethnic descriptions.

### **\*Appeal to parental values**

"Dad, when I was growing up, you taught me to treat others the way I wanted to be treated. And I just don't think that term is very nice."

## **#5 What Can I Do About Stubborn Relatives?**

A woman says her father and uncle know how much she opposes racist or homophobic “jokes.” “I’ve told them that all the time, and they just keep telling ‘jokes’ to make me mad, to push my buttons and get a reaction. They know I hate it.”

### **\*Describe what is happening**

Define the offense, and describe the pattern of behavior. "Every time I come over, you tell 'jokes' I find offensive."

### **\*Describe how you are feeling**

"I love you so much, and I know you love me, too. I wonder why you choose to keep hurting me with your comments and 'jokes.'"

### **\*Appeal to family ties**

### **\*State values, set limits**

### **\*Ask for a response**

## **#6 What Can I Do About Casual Comments?**

A Chicago woman who is adopted, still grieving the death of her mother, is told, "Oh, so that wasn't your real mother who died?" The woman writes, "I was so hurt by this I didn't know what to say."

### **\*Approach friends as allies**

When a friend makes a hurtful comment or poses an offensive question, it's easy to shut down, put up walls or disengage. Explain how the comment offended you.

### **\*Respond with silence**

Say nothing and wait for the speaker to respond. Then describe the comment from your point of view.

### **\*Talk about differences**

## **#7 What Can I Do About Unwanted Email?**

Many of us receive unwanted “joke” emails forwarded by friends or colleagues. Lesbians and gays, Muslims, Catholics, Jews, people with disabilities, Republicans, Democrats, people of all races and ethnicities, blondes and people overweight: The targets of such “joke” emails are innumerable.

### **\*Forward no more**

Stop e-mailed bigotry at your computer. Don't forward it; instead, delete it.

### **\*Reply to sender**

Explain that the e-mail offended you and ask to be removed from any future e-mails.

### **\*Reply to all**

Do the same thing, but hit "reply all," sharing your thoughts with everyone on the email list.

## **#8 What Can I Do About Casual Comments at Work?**

An African American businesswoman in the South writes: "I was speaking with a white co-worker when, midway through the conversation, she smiled and said, 'You speak so clearly. Have you had diction lessons?' — like for an African American to speak clearly, we'd have to have diction lessons."

### **\*Interrupt early**

If people are lax in responding to bigotry, then bigotry prevails. Speak up early and often in order to build a more inclusive environment.

### **\*Use — or establish — policies**

Call upon existing policies to address bigoted language or behavior.

### **\*Go to supervisor**

If the behavior persists, take your complaints to management

## **#9 What Can I Do About Workplace Humor?**

A man mentions to a colleague that he is originally from West Virginia. The colleague laughs and says she knows some "jokes" about people from West Virginia. She tells not one but three "jokes," each with an increasingly bigoted punch line. The man, at a loss for words, simply sits down when she is done.

### **\*Don't laugh**

Meet a bigoted "joke" with silence, and maybe a raised eyebrow.

### **\*Interrupt the laughter**

"Why does everyone think that's funny?"

### **\*Set a 'not in my workspace' rule**

### **\*Provide alternate humor**

Learn and share jokes that don't rely on bias, bigotry or stereotypes as the root of their humor

## **#10 What Can I Do About Sexist Remarks?**

A female employee reports, "One of my male coworkers always comments on the physical appearance of our female colleagues."

A man wrote of a co-worker telling him his knowledge of gardening makes him seem "like a woman."

### **\*Be direct**

### **\*Identify any pattern**

### **\*Have a discussion**

If sexism is a persistent problem in your workplace, discuss the issue. Provide support for one another, and create an action plan.

## **#11 What Can I Do About Meeting Missteps?**

A good-hearted liberal co-worker makes comments at staff meetings like, 'All Republicans are stupid,' or, 'All Republicans are this,' or 'All Republicans are that.' I'm a Democrat who agrees with her politics, but I think those comments are offensive.

### **\*Seize the moment**

"Why do you think that?"

### **\*Address the issue privately**

Take the coworker aside and gently explain what you find offensive.

## **#12 What Can I Do About Boss Bias?**

A woman works at a company where a male co-worker comes in one day with a newly pierced ear. Their manager sees the earring and laughingly calls him a "faggot."

### **\*Focus on the company's people**

"A lot of different kinds of people work for you, and for this company. What you just said, does it really honor me and the other people here?"

### **\*Tie tolerance to the bottom line**

Remind your supervisor that when people feel valued and respected, a healthy and productive work environment emerges.

### **\*Go up the ladder**

Consider your options, based on your supervisor's temperament and the office environment. Consult the human resources' department to find out what harassment policies are in place.

## **#13 What Can I Do About My Own Bias?**

"Without thinking," the woman writes, "I uttered a phrase I grew up hearing — 'Yeah, he's a real slave driver.' As soon as it was out of my mouth. I was ashamed and bewildered and wanted to apologize."

When a colleague tells you that you've said or done something that offends or hurts them, try not to be defensive, even if the statement's impact was unintentional.

### **\*Be open to feedback**

Ask clarifying questions.

### **\*Focus on the work relationship**

Strive to reconnect and ensure that the moment doesn't sidetrack your ongoing ability to work together.

### **\*Change your behavior**