

Guide to Allyship

 guidetoallyship.com

To be an ally is to...

1. Take on the struggle as your own.
2. Transfer the benefits of your privilege to those who lack it.
3. Amplify voices of the oppressed before your own.
4. Acknowledge that even though you feel pain, the conversation is not about you.
5. Stand up, even when you feel scared.
6. Own your mistakes and de-center yourself.
7. Understand that your education is up to you and no one else.

So you want to be an ally.

Welcome to the *Guide to Allyship*.

Think of this guide as one of many starting points in your journey to become a better ally. This guide isn't meant to be comprehensive nor is it perfect. There are people far more versed than I, who have dedicated their life's work to this sort of education.

In light of recent events and tragedies, I've been hearing the word "ally" a lot. Many people want to be an "ally", and even more people are unable to fulfill the duties allyship requires.

I use the word "ally" loosely because I find it overused and often abused by those who label themselves "allies." Despite its current misuse, using a different word would only cause confusion. As you read through this guide, be aware that your definition of "ally" may not be the same as the definition I'll introduce you to.

What's so special about this guide?

There are many great guides out there, and I acknowledge their existence. What's different about this guide is that it's open source (any one can contribute to it) and it doesn't get into specifics: racism, transphobia, gender discrimination, etc. and that's by design.

This guide can't and shouldn't be everything to you. At some point, you need to take responsibility and further your education. When you're done with the guide, please find ways to learn more.

Finally, this is a resource to help anyone considering allyship better understand the pros and cons of what being an ally entails. Allies understand their role in collaboration with people whose lives are affected daily by systemic oppression.

Don't take the responsibility of being an ally lightly.

Why this was created

In the summer of 2016, someone I considered an ally stood by and watched as I, a Black person, was berated by a racist. To make matters worse, I had a conversation with this person earlier in the day about the power allies can wield in situations of discrimination. But when the time came for them to take action, they were more interested in protecting their comfort.

Upset, I couldn't understand what happened. Did the conversation we had not get through? What didn't they step up? Then it dawned on me:

Saying you're an ally is much easier than actually being an ally. Saying you're an ally looks good on paper, especially if you're never questioned about your inaction.

Many self-defined "allies" wear the phrase and ideology like an article of clothing, easily discarded when it's no longer fashionable to wear.

If only those from underinvested communities could cast away the identities marking them as targets with such ease.

What is an ally?

I noted before that I used the word "ally" loosely. In fact, I personally no longer use the word. However, I *do* think it's a good starting place for those learning to be better allies. I also believe there's an opportunity to explore a better definition of the word. The best definition of "ally" (that I've found) comes from author Roxane Gay in her article for *Marie Claire*, "[On Making Black Lives Matter.](#)" In it, she notes:

Black people do not need allies. We need people to stand up and take on the problems borne of oppression as their own, without remove or distance.

We need people to do this even if they cannot fully understand what it's like to be oppressed for their race or ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, class, religion, or other marker of identity.

We need people to use common sense to figure out how to participate in social justice.

To recap: Being an ally doesn't necessarily mean you fully understand what it feels like to be oppressed. It means you're taking on the struggle as your own.

An individual from an underinvested community cannot easily cast away the weight of their identity (or identities) shaped through oppression on a whim. They carry that weight every single day, for better or for worse. An ally understands that this is a weight that they, too, must be willing to carry and never put down.

Why allies are necessary

Anyone has the potential to be an ally. Allies recognize that though they're not a member of the underinvested and oppressed communities they support, they make a concerted effort to better understand the struggle, every single day.

Because an ally might have more privilege and recognizes said privilege, they are powerful voices *alongside* oppressed ones.

The work of allyship

Being an ally is hard work.

Many would-be allies fear making mistakes that could have them labeled as “-ist” or “-ic” (racist, sexist, transphobic, homophobic, etc). But as an ally, you're also affected by a system of oppression. This means that as an ally, there is much to unlearn and learn—mistakes are expected. You need to own this as fact and should be willing to embrace the daily work of doing better.

As an ally, you need to own your mistakes and be proactive in your education, every day.

If you refuse to acknowledge that your words and actions are inherently shaped and influenced by systemic oppression, you're setting up yourself to fail.

Lack of self-awareness is not a trait of an ally. You'll be complicit in the oppression of those you intend to help. If you choose not to understand this, but label yourself an “ally”, you're essentially a wolf in sheep's clothing. You'll find ways to infiltrate vulnerable communities and wield far more power than someone who is outwardly “-ist” or “-ic” because you're “trusted.”

Just as society will not change overnight, neither will you. Here are some important do's and don'ts to consider as you learn, grow, and step into the role of an ally.

The Dos

- **Do** be open to listening
- **Do** be aware of your implicit biases

- **Do** your research to learn more about the history of the struggle in which you are participating
- **Do** the inner work to figure out a way to acknowledge how you participate in oppressive systems
- **Do** the outer work and figure out how to change the oppressive systems
- **Do** use your privilege to amplify (digitally and in-person) historically suppressed voices
- **Do** learn how to *listen* and accept criticism with grace, even if it's uncomfortable
- **Do** the work every day to learn how to be a better ally

The Don'ts

- **Do not** expect to be taught or shown. Take it upon yourself to use the tools around you to learn and answer your questions
 - **Do not** participate for the gold medal in the "Oppression Olympics" (you don't need to compare how your struggle is "just as bad as" a marginalized person's)
 - **Do not** behave as though you know best
 - **Do not** take credit for the labor of those who are marginalized and did the work before you stepped into the picture
 - **Do not** assume that every member of an underinvested community feels oppressed
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Boots & Sandals: How to handle mistakes

Contributed by [Presley Pizzo](#). Please credit Presley when referencing this section.

While mistakes are to be expected, what's the best way to go about resolving them?

Note: Parts of this section were originally based on [Kayla Reed's \(@iKaylaReed\)](#) tweet sharing her definition of what it means to be an ally. It's another great definition that'll help you follow along with this section!

Imagine your privilege is a heavy boot that keeps you from feeling when you're stepping on someone's feet or they're stepping on yours, while oppressed people have only sandals. If someone says, "ouch! You're stepping on my toes," how do you react?

Because we can think more clearly about stepping on someone's literal toes than we usually do when it comes to oppression, the problems with many common responses are obvious:

- **Centering yourself:** "I can't believe you think I'm a toe-stepper! I'm a good person!"
- **Denial that others' experiences are different from your own:** "I don't mind when people step on my toes."
- **Derailing:** "Some people don't even have toes, why aren't we talking about them instead?"
- **Refusal to center the impacted:** "All toes matter!"
- **Tone policing:** "I'd move my foot if you'd ask me more nicely."

- **Denial that the problem is fixable:** “Toes getting stepped on is a fact of life. You’ll be better off when you accept that.”
- **Victim blaming:** “You shouldn’t have been walking around people with boots!”
- **Withdrawing:** “I thought you wanted my help, but I guess not. I’ll just go home.”

In reality, most of us naturally know the right way to react when we step on someone’s toes, and we can use that to help us learn how to react when we commit microaggressions.

- **Center the impacted:** “Are you okay?”
- **Listen to their response and learn.**
- **Apologize for the impact, even though you didn’t intend it:** “I’m sorry!”
- **Stop the instance:** move your foot
- **Stop the pattern:** be careful where you step in the future. When it comes to oppression, we want to actually change the “footwear” to get rid of privilege and oppression (sneakers for all!), but metaphors can only stretch so far!

Reacting in a fair and equitable way isn’t about learning arbitrary rules or being a doormat. Rather, it’s about restoring and maintaining dignity and respect for everyone involved - both the person who is hurt, and you. Still, it’s hard to remember in the moment, because these issues are so charged in our society. As such, it may be helpful to reframe the situation so that you don’t feel defensive.

You may have noticed it’s easier to handle being corrected about something you didn’t know if you’re grateful for and even open to the opportunity to learn rather than embarrassed to have been wrong. Being able to let go of your ego is an incredibly important skill to develop.

Try starting with “Thanks for letting me know” to put yourself in a better frame of mind. If after you say that, you need to take some time to think about the situation, that’s fine, too. Just remember that this isn’t about changing the other person’s frame of mind. They’re allowed to be upset about being oppressed.

Apologies

So you’ve made a mistake and you want to apologize. Where do you begin?

What is an apology?

Before you can apologize, you need to know what an apology is.

Apologies are social contracts that hold you accountable. They tell others that you are taking responsibility, are open to the consequences of your actions, and plan to do better in the future.

Bad apologies are performances meant to protect pride and ego. They exist to make the apologizer feel and look good, while defending their intent.

Good apologies are heartfelt acts that let go of pride and ego. They center the pain of the impacted, regardless of the apologizer's intent.

Think of pain as a gradient—it doesn't have to be extreme to have a significant impact. Accidentally misgendering someone can cause them pain. Stepping on someone's toes can cause them pain.

Attributes of a good apology

Apologies aren't a magic fix and won't solve mistakes of the past, but there are a few attributes that make for a good apology.

- **Timely**

Delivered at the right moment in the right place and time.

Consider the context in which you want to apologize and how that might affect not only you but also the person receiving your apology.

Context can include your current mental state (are you feeling defensive? Upset? Nervous? Calm?), the physical space you're in (private or public area), or the apology's medium (phone, online, text message, in person).

- **Respects boundaries**

Given when the person receiving the apology consents to it.

Your desire to give an apology *right now* doesn't mean that the receiver is ready for it. Some people need space to process, and you should respect that. When they're willing to reconnect, if at all, they may let you know (or they may not).

- **Self-aware**

Know that the act of apology may not lead to the closure you expect.

The apology receiver may choose to never interact with you again. Either after you give an apology or before you give it. You have to find a way to make peace with that. Do not pressure or shame someone into accepting your apology.

One of the greatest gifts we can give ourselves is learning how to create closure within rather than expecting other people to give it to us.

- **Reflective**

Signals that the apologizer is taking full responsibility for their actions.

Apologizing means letting go of your ego to show that you care about someone and want to make things right. Good apologies center the person being apologized to. They also take direct ownership of the actions that caused pain by naming them clearly.

Contribute to this guide

This guide is open source, meaning that anyone can contribute. I'm a queer Black femme and my voice should not be the only one shaping this guide.

If you identify as a member of an underinvested community and want to contribute, please submit a pull-request on this [GitHub repository](#).

If you aren't a GitHub user and would still like to contribute, send me an email at [guidetoallyship \[to\] byamelie \[dot\] co](mailto:guidetoallyship@byamelie.co).

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