

10 Tips to Confront Oppressive Comments (and Still be Invited Back to the Next Dinner Party)

by Alicia Kalmanovitch, MSW, RSW

Many of us have been in this situation: you are at a dinner party, having a nice time, when someone makes one of those comments that makes you shudder. You know the ones I'm talking about — the sexist, racist, homophobic, or otherwise discriminatory comment that makes you sigh and think, "Why did you just say that, and what am I going to do about it?" Having chosen a profession based on the values of respect, equality, and integrity, those disrespectful comments, no matter how small, likely bother you no end. So what do you do about it? The following is a list of 10 ways to confront oppressive comments and still be invited back to the next dinner party. Not all of the suggestions will be appropriate for every situation, so pick the one you think will work best in the context of what's going on.

These 10 tips were created with certain assumptions: (1) Most people want to do the right thing, (2) people can change, and (3) confronting people from a place of love and re-education is more effective than punishing them. Keeping these thoughts in mind, and remembering that the person you are talking to is a fellow human being with thoughts and feelings as well, can help you remain cool and calm and successfully manage the situation at hand. Like many skills, feeling comfortable confronting oppressive comments takes time and practice.

1. Lay the Groundwork

If you know discriminatory comments are likely to emerge in a certain situation, you can stop the comments before they happen by initiating a positive conversation about whatever subject you know that person is likely to bring up, or mentioning how important you think it is to speak about others respectfully. If you get your two cents in there first, it can make clear that if people are going to be talking about that subject, it should be in a positive way.

2. Shut it Down Early

If an oppressive comment comes out and you are worried it may turn into an entire oppressive conversation, shut it down as soon as you can. This can easily be done by not acknowledging the comment and quickly bringing up another subject. It helps if you know of some topics that are of mutual interest to the people around you. Hopefully, you will start a new conversation, the comment will not come up again, and that person will recognize that those comments aren't appreciated.

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3. Ask Them to Cite in APA

Not actually, but asking someone where they got the oppressive information they are talking about from can tactfully point out that what they are saying may not actually be true. You can begin a conversation with them by bringing in information you have about the subject from reliable news sources, an interesting book you've read, or the last category A workshop you attended.

4. Humour

Using humour to confront oppressive comments can be a great way to say what you need to say and not seem too



confrontational. A quick, witty comment can allow the person saying it to save face while hopefully still getting the hint that what they said wasn't okay. Be careful when using this tip as it can make matters worse if the person didn't get the hint and thinks you are supporting them.

5. Loud Silence

Sometimes it's hard to think on your feet and know exactly what to say in the moment. That's when loud silence can be a useful asset. Simply not acknowledging the oppressive comment with words can send a message that is loud and clear: that you do not agree with what they said.

6. "In My Experience..."

As social workers, many of us have worked at some level with the people or situations the oppressive comment is about. By simply sharing your experience on the topic, you can confront what the person is saying and perhaps change their view on it. Try saying, "In my 15 years of working with X, I've actually never encountered that. Where have you experienced that?" This can be a powerful statement and can shut down the oppressive conversation by making people aware that what they are saying may not be true, or it can begin a rich conversation.

7. Say You Do Not Agree

One straightforward way to make it clear that you did not agree with someone's oppressive comment is to directly tell them you don't agree with it. This does not have to be done in a hostile way, but rather can seem like part of the regular conversation and hopefully move the discussion to a less oppressive space. Some people can feel uncomfortable directly saying they don't agree with someone, but if they feel at liberty to express their opinion, you should too.

8. Modelling

This tip works really well when people are using oppressive words and labels for others. You can easily use non-oppressive words yourself when talking about the same subject. When people hear you using non-oppressive language, they may start using it themselves. They may also ask you why you use the words you use and this can be an opportunity for a good conversation.

9. #MakeItAwkward

The racist event that happened in September in our province's capital with actor Jesse Lipscombe brought into being the Make It Awkward movement. Even though it can be uncomfortable addressing someone's oppressive comment, it is important, and it can be good to #MakeItAwkward.

10. Bring it up Later

Sometimes when we hear an oppressive comment, we do not address it in the moment. We can then regret it later and think about what we should have done. Remember that you can always bring it up at a later time and share your thoughts about that issue. It's never too late to right a wrong.

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