

So You Call Yourself an Ally: 10 Things All ‘Allies’ Need to Know



November 8, 2013 by [Jamie Utt](#) Source: [Very Smart Brothas](#)

As happens every time that I read something from [Black Girl Dangerous](#), I recently found myself snapping, nodding, and yelling out “YES!” while reading a piece from Mia McKenzie. Her article “[No More ‘Allies’](#)” made me profoundly uncomfortable – *which is a good thing*. I was uncomfortable because it was a call to reflection about my own “ally” identifications and my own work. To start, read her piece. Seriously. It is awesome. Beyond that, though, it’s time for those of us who fashion

ourselves “*allies*” or as “*currently operating in solidarity with*” to have a conversation.

More and more, I am seeing precisely what McKenzie is describing – people of identity privilege who are identifying as “*allies*” almost as if it is a core part of their identity. What’s worse, I keep seeing people respond to criticism about their oppressive language or problematic humor with, “*But I’m an ally!*” For instance, I recently saw an acquaintance (*who notably identifies as Straight*) post a pretty problematic joke about Gay men on Twitter. Aside from expressing my discontent in a tweet, I reached out to her in a private message to explain why I took issue with her joke. Her response, though, was to say, “*Jamie, you know that I’m an LGBT ally! I speak out for Gay rights all the time! This was clearly just a joke.*”

And therein lies the problem.

The identification of “*ally*” was so prominent in this person’s mind that she couldn’t even hear criticism of how her actions were out of alignment with her professed desire to be an “*ally*!” So “*allies*,” let’s talk.

Credit Where Credit is Due

Before I say anything else, though, I should note something important about this article. None of what I am writing here are my ideas. They are drawn from Mia McKenzie’s piece, from conversations I’ve had with people of many different marginalized identities, from theorists, novelists, bloggers – but none of them are inherently mine. They are the ideas of the People of Color, Queer-identified people, women, differently-abled people, poor folks, Jewish people, Muslim people, Atheists, undocumented citizens, and others.

And noting this is important.

Because part of being an ally means giving credit where credit is due and never taking credit for the anti-oppressive thinking, writing, theorizing, and action of the marginalized and oppressed. Which I guess leads me to my point.

10 Things Every ‘Ally’ Needs to Remember

There are lots of ways to be a great “*ally*” – and innumerable ways to be a terrible one. But it’s not rocket science. There are simple things you can keep in mind and do in order to be a better person “*currently operating in solidarity with*” the marginalized or oppressed. And while this list is not comprehensive, it’s definitely somewhere to start.

1. Being an Ally is About Listening

As McKenzie puts it, “*Shut up and listen.*”

As someone striving to be an ally, the most important thing we can do is listen to as many voices of those we’re allying ourselves with as possible. Now, does this mean that we should assume that just because, say, one Person of Color said it that it’s the absolutely truth that we should parrot? Absolutely not. If that were the case, then [Don Lemon](#) would clearly speak for all Black people. But listening to a diversity of marginalized voices can help you understand the core of any given issue. And it also can help you understand why the opinion of your one Lesbian friend is not necessarily the best defense of your use of heterosexist language.

2. Stop Thinking of ‘Ally’ as a Noun

Being an ally isn’t a status. The moment that we decide “*I’m an ally,*” we’re in trouble.

As [Mia McKenzie puts it](#):

“‘Currently operating in solidarity with’ is undeniably an action. It describes what a person is doing in the moment. It does not give credit for past acts of solidarity without regard for current behavior. It does not assume future acts of solidarity. It speaks only to the actions of the present.”

3. ‘Ally’ is Not a Self-Proclaimed Identity

Really, being an ally is not an identity at all, but it’s vitally important that we understand that we cannot simply *decide* we are allies. Being in solidarity is something we can strive for, but in the end, it is the choice of those we are attempting to ally ourselves to as to whether they trust us enough to call us an ally. Additionally, just because one person considers me an ally, that does not mean that every person of that marginalized identity considers me an ally or should! Trust is something earned through concerted action, not given simply because of our actions in a particular arena or context.

4. Allies Don’t Take Breaks

The thing about oppression is that it is constant. Those who are oppressed and marginalized in our society do not get to take breaks and respites. Thus, if you truly want to act in solidarity, you cannot simply retreat into your privilege when you just don't want to engage. This is one of the hardest things for me in being an ally. Sometimes I just don't have the energy to respond to my super classist uncle or to that racist comment from a Facebook friend. I don't want to get into an endless discussion about how they "*didn't mean it that way*" or how I'm "*just being too PC or sensitive*." But People of Color have no choice but to resist racism every single day of their lives. Women have no choice but to weather the shit storm of misogyny every day of their lives. Differently abled people have no choice but to deal with and respond to ableism every day of their lives. And in the end, part of the privilege of your identity is that you have a choice about whether or not to resist oppression. And falling back into your privilege, especially when you are most needed, is not being in solidarity.

5. Allies Educate Themselves Constantly

Standing in solidarity with a marginalized or oppressed person or people means that we need to know our shit. We need to educate ourselves about the issues facing those with whom we want to be allied and about the history of said oppression. One of the most important types of education is listening (see #1), but there are endless resources (*books, blogs, media outlets, speakers, YouTube videos, etc.*) to help you learn. What you *should not* do, though, is expect those with whom you want to ally yourself to teach you. That is not their responsibility. Sure, listen to them when they decide to drop some knowledge or perspective, but do not go to them and expect them to explain their oppression for you.

6. You Can't Be an Ally in Isolation

To a certain degree, it is entirely possible for someone to stand in solidarity with a group of marginalized people even if they have no relationships with said people. At a surface level, you can support the cause and advocate in your community for equal rights or speak out against oppression. But solidarity in total isolation lacks one vital thing: accountability. This is particularly important for people of privilege, but really any person who wants to act in solidarity needs to recognize that allyship cannot exist in isolation. This is not to say that your "*one Black friend*" legitimizes all of your actions and self-professed "*allyship*." In fact, some of the most important accountability comes from relationships that are *not* friendships. But without a diverse community to engage with and without other activists to hold you accountable, your understanding of "*solidarity*" can very quickly become paternalism or, worse, outright recreation of oppression.

7. Allies Don't Need to Be in the Spotlight

I can't help but acknowledge the irony of my writing this one, as my work *literally* puts me in the spotlight in some conversations about oppression, but hang with me. True solidarity means supporting the work of those you're allying yourself to, not solely creating a platform for your own voice and work. Sure, your privilege may afford you the spotlight sometimes, and there are times when you can use that spotlight to talk to people who share your identity (see #8), but whenever possible, allies turn that spotlight away from themselves and to the voices that are so often marginalized and ignored. In my own work, I work hard to ensure that my work is grounded squarely in the scholarship and lived experiences of those with whom I ally myself, and I work hard to share or abdicate the spotlight to those with whom I attempt to act in solidarity whenever possible. Perhaps I fail more than I succeed in this realm, but it is something I must continue to keep central in my praxis.

8. Allies Focus on Those Who Share Their Identity

As a person who benefits every single day from White privilege, it is not my place to engage People of Color in a discussion about what is or is not racist. That's not solidarity. However, I have a very specific responsibility in engaging conversations about racism: *talking to other White people*. Beyond listening, arguably the most important thing that I can do to act in solidarity is to engage those who share my identity. As a man, I have a specific responsibility to engage men in building a more positive masculinity and standing up to misogyny and sexism. As a White person, I have a responsibility to stand up to racism and work to bring White people into the anti-racist conversation in a way that they can hear and access. As an able-bodied person, I have a responsibility to call out examples of everyday ableism.

9. When Criticized or Called Out, Allies Listen, Apologize, Act Accountably, and Act Differently Going Forward

The single most important thing I've ever been told about being an ally came from a professor of Color who profoundly impacted my life:

"If you choose to do social justice work, you are going to screw up – a lot. Be prepared for that. And when you screw up, be prepared to listen to those who you hurt, apologize with honesty and integrity, work hard to be accountable to them, and make sure you act differently going forward."

There are few lessons more important for "allies" to understand than this one. When you screw up and damage trust and hurt and anger those you have allied yourself to, listening is important, but it's not enough. Apologizing earnestly is important, but it's not enough. Working hard to make sure you are accountable to those you've wronged is important, but it's not enough. In addition to all of these, you have a responsibility to learn from the mistakes you've made and to do better going forward.

10. Allies Never Monopolize the Emotional Energy

One of the things that I love about the [White Privilege Conference](#) is its commitment to accountable racial caucusing spaces where White folks can meet with other White people, holding them accountable as they process their feelings or learning and where People of Color can process without the intrusiveness of White privilege and oppression. In my experience, the White caucus can get pretty emotional, but the facilitators are trained and ready to hold people accountable to their privilege and process. I've also heard that the various People of Color caucuses can be pretty emotional, charged with anger and sadness and hope and community. That space is vital. Virtually every year, though, there is a White person who doesn't get the need for these spaces. A few years back, a White woman burst into one of the People of Color caucuses, throwing herself on the floor, crying, asking for forgiveness, bemoaning her Whiteness and her role in oppression.

And I honestly think this woman would have considered herself an "ally."

One of the more common and egregious mistakes supposed "allies" can make is to expect emotional energy from those to whom we ally ourselves. To once again quote McKenzie, "[T]he people who experience racism, misogyny, ableism, queerphobia, transphobia, classism, etc. are exhausted."

The last thing they need is our monopolizing of the emotional energy to only further their exhaustion. Surely allies need emotional support, but it must come from other allies. Don't expect marginalized people to do the emotional work for you or feel sorry for you or forgive you.

Solidarity is vitally important to any movement toward social justice, but it also runs the tremendous risk of recreating the very power structures of oppression that it purports to challenge. Sure, the above list is a start, but as someone striving to work in solidarity, I recognize that I should never have the final word.

So please, what would you add?

What else must we who seek to be allies remember if we hope to advance rather than hold back the struggles for justice?