
Responding to Jokes and Slurs

Many people are unsure what to say or do when confronted with offensive humor or slurs. When bystanders choose to stand silently by, however, they may be inadvertently communicating their acceptance of the behavior to others. The following process outlines a way to respond that has proved helpful for many people, from elementary school children to adults.

1. Clarify for yourself what you want to get out of the interaction. If your primary goal is to express your anger and indignation toward the offender, it is unlikely that the interaction will be personally satisfying. Your anger may generate equally-offensive remarks or you may succeed in publicly embarrassing the person, but these responses are ineffective in changing the person's behavior in the future.
2. Assume good will. Many people who make offensive remarks do so out of ignorance. Because they do not intend harm, they often assume no harm is done.
3. Talk to the person privately. By speaking to the offender one-on-one, you remove the person's need to "save face" publicly or to defend the actions in front of a group.
4. Use "I" statements, not "you" statements. Your goal is to let the offender know how you feel about what was said. Instead of focusing on what the other person did "wrong," communicate how the incident made you feel and why. Choose words that will help eliminate the offender's need to defend his or her actions.

5. Remember your rights. You do not have the right to dictate someone else's sense of humor. You do, however, have the right to request that this type of humor not be used in your presence.