Say something

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In any group which is primarily homogeneous, a culture starts to develop around the dominant culture. To participate in the culture, you need to engage in it. Everyone wants to fit in and be accepted by their peers. If you're surrounded by men who speak dismissively of women, for example, then you also feel the need to do this.

For many years, I tried to fit in. Every time a colleague unthinkingly made a sexist comment, I awkwardly laughed and brushed it off. I was telling them that it was OK, that I was cool and "one of the guys" – not like those other women. In the end, this just filled me with repressed rage and self-loathing. I had become part of the very thing I despised.

Recently I made a commitment to myself: every time this happened, I would say something out loud to the person who had made me angry. This was a lot harder than I originally thought. There is a kind of unspoken social rule which prevents you from saying something which might make someone else uncomfortable. It's easier to sweep something under the carpet and pretend it never happened.

The goal here is not to get the other person to apologise. If that is what you want, you will probably be disappointed. Instead, you will hopefully achieve two things. First, you will remove your own sense of burning resentment and allow yourself to sleep peacefully at night. Second, usually

the other person is not speaking out of malicious intent or any real conviction. Calling them out is often all that's needed to make them aware of their language.

Ingredients

- A person who has just said something you find sexist or otherwise discriminatory or dismissive.
- Repressed anger.
- A desire to make change.

Method

1. Think about what has just been said. What about it made you angry? Why did you feel this way? Sometimes it's hard to move from thinking: "This person is a jerk!" into something more constructive, but this step is key to getting to the root of why you are mad. It's also important for helping you prepare for the next step.
2. Carefully frame what you want to say in a constructive manner. A good method is to use the non-violent communication framework (<https://www.cnvc.org/learn/nvc-foundations>). Observe... Feel... Need... Request. You do not have to make it complicated. Often simply observing what has been said is enough.
3. If you feel too choked up with rage to think properly, saying something like: "That sounds a bit sexist to me" is fine.

Remember that the goal is not to attack the other person or make it personal. Do not call them a jerk, even if you are thinking it. Say something to the other person in a neutral voice. You do not need to sound angry (you're not trying to start a fight), or upset (you're not a victim). This step is very difficult and can feel quite socially awkward. That's OK! Remember that even the tiniest thing can make a difference or change someone's mind. Even doing something small is still doing something.

4. If the other person replies to your comment or challenges you, be prepared to have a conversation about it. Try to remain neutral and non-confrontational. Explain simply why you had a problem with what they said. You don't need to belabour the point or make them feel badly.
5. Sometimes you will get no response, and that's fine. Don't expect the other person to reply – they might feel too embarrassed to say anything. Finally, remember that if the conversation continues to be difficult you do not have to continue – see *Unravelling rhetoric* for examples of how to leave this type of conversation.

Cook's tip

Speaking to someone privately can help boost your own confidence about approaching them and also avoid turning it into a public shaming exercise.

Warning

It's not unusual for the other party to become angry or ashamed when confronted. They may even blame you for making them feel badly. Your relationship with the other person may become strained for a while, but hopefully you will both benefit in the long run from your honesty.