

9 Phrases Allies Can Say When Called Out Instead of Getting Defensive

May 29, 2017 by Sam Dylan Finch



Person apologizing to another person while touching their arm

Real talk: No one likes being called out. It's difficult to grapple with the idea that we may have gotten it wrong – that, despite our best intentions, we've done real harm.

And I know from personal experience that our gut reaction isn't always effective. I often can't help but feel a surge of defensiveness, because sitting with my mistakes can be a really uncomfortable experience. What I've learned along the way, however, is that this discomfort can be a *good* thing. All the best opportunities for growth and reflection involve some level of discomfort.

Being [called out \(or in\)](#) can be a gift, as it calls on us to rise up and do better – to tap into our empathy and do the serious and critical work of interrogating our own beliefs and biases.

This is how we align our values with our actions. Responding to a call-outs involves slowing down. It requires decentering our own feelings and tuning in, which takes a certain amount of practice and skill. This can be difficult to do when we're feeling fragile and vulnerable. When I first started writing publicly, I had no idea how to navigate those feelings, but I've been fortunate enough to have the chance to flex these muscles and learn as I go along. One question I get often – especially from folks who already struggle with anxiety and dealing with conflict – is how to first respond without doing further damage. When our emotions put up a wall in front of us, it can feel like we're cornered or trapped, and we become reactive instead of thoughtful.

We can wind up rambling, making excuses, denying the impact, and even gaslighting – all in a frantic attempt to deescalate the situation. And unfortunately, we end up perpetuating the harm that prompted the call-out in the first place.

I actually think the best responses are deceptively simple.

Don't know what I mean? I've compiled a list that I've picked up (as both the one having been called out and the one doing the call-out) that can facilitate healing. While this is by no means an exhaustive list, it's a place to start – and often times, getting started is the most difficult part. The next time you're called on to do better, take a deep breath (or better yet, *a lot* of deep breaths), and consider the following responses:

1. 'I Recognize That I Have Work to Do.'

Your first instinct might be to say something like, "I didn't mean to!" This is a super common gut reaction, and you're not alone there. But while it may be true that you didn't purposefully harm anyone, you aren't actually acknowledging the harm that you've caused when you become defensive. You can express the exact same sentiment, while still acknowledging that you messed up, by simply saying, "Wow, you're right. I need to work on this." "I have work to do" is a great response on many levels. It validates the concerns that have been raised, and it also affirms that the responsibility to fix this situation rests with you, and not the marginalized folks who have called you out. It's a way of saying "I really didn't mean to," and "you're absolutely right" at the same time – which allows you to express your intention but, most importantly, still own the impact your actions have on others.

2. 'I'm Going to Take Some Time to Reflect on This.'

Sometimes in the moments after a call-out, we aren't ready to respond. This is especially true of folks who already struggle with conflict and anxiety, and in the immediate moment, are perhaps too emotional – or even fragile – to engage. (Trust me, I've been there many times. [Call-out culture](#) hasn't always been kind to neurodiverse folks for whom these moments can be especially difficult to navigate.) It's absolutely okay to step back until you're ready to tune in to what folks are saying. Take the space you need to reflect, research, reexamine, and breathe. Let folks know that you're engaged, and that you're going to take a minute to think about what's been said. "I'm listening and really appreciate what's been said so far," you might reply. "I'm going to take some time to reflect before I respond." As long as you're actually committed to circling back around (*don't make promises you don't intend to keep!*), this is always a better choice than getting swallowed up in conflict that you aren't prepared to handle.

3. 'I Appreciate the Labor You've Put In.'

Call-outs involve a lot of [emotional labor](#). Whenever I've contacted someone and asked them to recognize harm, I often have to open my own wounds wide open and take on the role of an educator as I try to explain where they went wrong. I by no means delight in doing this. I put in the time and effort, though, because I believe that this person can do better. It hurts when someone takes that labor for granted. It hurts when they ignore the fact that I've invested in them, and they instead ignore me, block me, [gaslight me](#), or insult me. Even if they don't initially agree with my assessment of the situation, it wouldn't hurt to acknowledge the effort I've put in to help them understand and the ways in which I made myself vulnerable. When marginalized people take the time to teach you something, it's essential to recognize their labor. Name it explicitly – yes, even if in the

moment you still don't understand, didn't ask for it, or are struggling with your emotions about it.

This labor was done for you because someone believed in your ability to do better. If nothing else, take a moment to appreciate the effort that was made.

4. 'I Apologize, I'm Going to Do Better.'

This [video on how to apologize](#) is required for anyone and everyone who aspires to be a decent person, but especially if you're an ally to marginalized people. Apologizing isn't just about saying "I'm sorry" – it's a skill that takes a lot of practice and reflection. Knowing how to apologize thoughtfully and authentically is a key part of being an ally. Apologizing is an essential part of responding to call-outs, but it should always be accompanied by a commitment to doing better. Just saying "I'm sorry" isn't enough – you need to also express your investment in the community that has called on you. Let them know that you're not only sorry for the harm you caused, but that you'll learn from this experience and change your behavior. Because real talk, an apology is useless if you don't intend to make a change.

5. 'How Can I Make This Right?'

For the record, no one calling you out is required to [educate you further](#), or assist you in creating a plan of action. It's your responsibility first and foremost to make things right. However, in some cases, it doesn't hurt to ask what you can do moving forward and see if actions can be taken to address the harm that was caused. "I want to make this right," you might say. "If you have the energy or time, please let me know if there's something I can do." Pairing this with a sincere apology and a recognition of the labor that was already done on your behalf definitely doesn't hurt. It's important to remember, too, if you aren't *actually* willing to take action, don't ask people to make suggestions that you won't follow up on. Make sure you mean it before you solicit advice – you'd be surprised by how many folks are all talk.

6. 'What I'm Gathering Is [Insert What You've Learned].'

You can say "sorry" until you're blue in the face, but if you don't really know what you're apologizing for, it's meaningless. Part of actively engaging with a call-out is actually learning from your mistake. This is why being able to share what you've learned is important. It's not only a great way to validate and appreciate the folks who've called you out, but it can also teach others who don't "get it" so they don't make the same mistake. (Hint: It's also never too late to use this response. Even if your initial reply wasn't ideal, you can always come back around and share what you've figured out.) "What I'm gathering is that I not only perpetuated an anti-Black stereotype," you might say, "but my defensiveness only caused further harm." This lets people know that you're not all lip-service – you have paid attention to what was said, and now you're doing the work to make it right. This pairs nicely with a sincere apology, an acknowledgment of the labor that folks did on your behalf, and a commitment to doing better. If you haven't already noticed, mixing and matching the suggestions on this list only strengthens your response!

7. ‘Do You Have Resources You’d Recommend?’

This is a response that should be used *very carefully*.

You never want to imply that the folks who are calling you out are required to give you an extensive education or invest even more labor on your behalf. That isn’t an appropriate response – that’s entitlement. At the end of the day, you aren’t owed anything, and it’s your responsibility to try to [educate yourself to the best of your ability](#).

That’s why posing this question should be an invitation, not an expectation. “I appreciate everyone’s thoughtful responses,” you could say. “I’m doing some research now, but if anyone has a favorite resource on this topic that they’d like to share, I’m totally open to it!” Invite people to elevate the dialogue and engage more deeply with you (more often than not, when invited, folks will appreciate this!) but never expect people to do the work on your behalf.

8. ‘Thank You.’

You should never respond to a call-out without thanking the folks who took the time to educate you. Seriously. If you aren’t sure why, re-read response #3.

No one was required to correct you or engage with you, but their belief that you could do better led them to invest in you – and that investment matters.

Thank you says, “You didn’t have to, but I appreciate that you did.” Thank you says, “I don’t take you or your labor for granted.” Thank you says, “What you did has real value and importance to me.” And I can’t imagine what marginalized person, after putting in the time, doesn’t want that from you – especially if you follow it up with a commitment to doing better next time.

9. ‘I Believe You.’

Often times, when marginalized people in particular call out their allies, a big part of that labor is being vulnerable enough to share how an issue personally affects them.

But because of the oppressive systems we live under, marginalized people are often met with disbelief when they’re courageous enough to share their experiences.

When you respond to a call-out by rejecting those experiences, you’re effectively re-traumatizing the community you’ve already harmed. Don’t be *that person*. Don’t deny their experiences. Don’t gaslight or presume to know their lives or their pain better than they do. Say, “I know this is painful for you to share, and I want you to know that I believe you.” **And mean it – believe them.** Acknowledge the work you have to put in. Take the time to educate yourself. Express gratitude for their labor. Apologize and make a commitment to them. Take concrete actions to address the harm. Do your homework, share what you’ve learned, and lead by example. No matter what your gut reaction is and how fragile you might feel, it’s your ethical obligation to model the values you claim to hold. In a world that so often denies the pain of marginalized people, believing them is the most critical part of responding to any call-out. Set aside your defensiveness, your hurt feelings, and your fears. Start from a place of belief – and if you can’t in the moment, take the time to reflect until you can.

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