

SO YOU WANT TO BE AN ALLY!

A zine on anti-oppression, allyship,
and being a less shitty person

What's the point of this zine?

This zine is a very basic guide to taking some very basic steps toward being a decent human being. If you're reading this, chances are you're interested in anti-oppression, ending inequality, and allyship. (If you're not interested in anti-oppression, ending inequality, or allyship [oof] then I would encourage you to read this anyway. And, uh, you should probably re-evaluate your life choices while you're at it.) I hope this zine will give you the tools to figure out how to work in solidarity with all targets of oppression. While the specifics of every system of oppression (and how to fight them) are beyond the scope of this zine, there are some basic principles of allyship that are relevant to all anti-oppression work.

Hopefully this zine will leave you better prepared to confront your own privileges and work on dismantling the systems of oppression that give you those privileges. In the big picture, this zine is an attempt at a tiny little drop in the bucket of anti-oppression.

I am not an expert, and I make mistakes. If you think that something I've written in here is wildly (or even mildly) off, or is unclear, or you have any other questions, please get in touch with me! My email address is vegetablesforbreakfast@gmail.com and I look forward to hearing from folks.

Why I'm writing this zine

I'm writing this zine for a couple different reasons. I am a queer, trans, currently able-bodied, white, middle class, god-free anti-occupation Jew living in the United States. I am a target of multiple oppressions, and I am an agent of multiple oppressions. As a target of oppression, I need more allies. Seriously, y'all need to step it up. I'm really tired of trying to convince well-meaning cisgender people that yes, cissexism exists in such "progressive" places as Olympia, Washington. At the same time, I need to do a better job of calling out fellow agents of oppression (and myself) when we screw up. In the discussions I have about oppression and privilege, I find myself repeating the same arguments over and over again – it's as if every privilege-denying person who doesn't want to confront their own role in perpetuating oppression reads from the same script. I wanted to collect my responses to that script in one

place, so others can read them as well and have more ammunition in the fight against oppression.

I spend a lot of time engaging in arguments about oppression. Most of those arguments have to do with either cissexism/transphobia or racism, so the examples I use in the zine primarily focus on those two systems of oppression. I don't mean to imply that struggles against racism and transphobia are any more important than any other system of oppression - there is no hierarchy of oppression. But I try to speak of specifics and from my own experience rather than in the hypothetical, so I use examples with which I am familiar.

Finally, I am writing this zine because I'm sick of dealing with well-meaning but privilege-denying "progressives" who won't take the time to educate themselves. I live in a relatively progressive town. There's a pretty strong radical presence here. As a trans person, I feel safer being out about my gender identity than I have anywhere else I've lived, although that's not saying much. I'm misgendered on a daily basis. Using the bathroom is a terrifying experience when I can't find a single occupancy unit. I'm told implicitly and explicitly on a daily basis that my identity isn't valid. I'd be dealing with even more oppression if I were interested in medically transitioning. But time and time again, I've met people who think that this town is some perfect and accepting utopia, that we don't have any remaining issues to work on. This is blatantly false. I am not going to detail all the hardships I face on a daily basis, but I want to debunk the myth that just because you live in a town where you don't hear about gay bashings all the time or there aren't separate water fountains for white people and people of color or there's a large visible queer population, doesn't mean you're not still capable of being oppressive.

None of the ideas in this zine are original or new. Please copy and distribute at will. I care more about making the world a less shitty place than about receiving credit for ideas I didn't come up with on my own in the first place.

What is an ally? Why should I work toward allyship?

An ally is someone who works to end oppression within their personal and professional life. An ally works to end a form of oppression from which they receive privilege. For example, a white person who works to end racism, a cisgender person who works to end transphobia/cissexism, or a straight person who combats heterosexism. Allies align themselves with the people over whom they hold privilege and work to dismantle the system of oppression that gives them those privileges.

Working toward allyship is a matter of being a less shitty person and making the world a less shitty place. Oppression sucks. Working to dismantle oppression is an obligation that all of us who are interested in equality have.

Glossary

Oppression: The way one group exerts dominance and control over another group.

Agent of oppression: The group that exerts dominance and control over another group and receives certain privileges because of that.

Target of oppression: The group that is on the receiving end of a system of oppression and is denied certain privileges because of that.

Don't tokenize

Just because you have a friend who is a target of a particular oppression, doesn't mean you're not capable of perpetuating that oppression. The privilege-denying white person who says "But I have a black friend! I can't be racist!" is an unfortunate cliché, and I encounter that cliché all the time. Systems of oppression are more than just personal prejudice. If you receive privilege from that system of oppression, then you are capable of perpetuating that system of oppression even if you don't harbor any personal prejudice against its targets, even if you have friends who are targets of that oppression.

When you say "But I have a _____ friend!", you tokenize that person - you've reduced them to that characteristic as well as presumed they can speak for all people who share that target status. I can't speak for all trans people - If I were to endorse some transphobic behavior in a friend of mine (which I wouldn't), that wouldn't negate any other trans person's right to call that person out on that behavior, and it wouldn't negate that person's obligation to end that oppressive behavior. Having friends who are people of color doesn't give me a free pass to be racist.

Ally? Says who?

You do not get to call yourself an ally. I don't get to call myself an ally. No one gets to bestow that title upon themselves. If certain people of color wish to call me an ally in order to identify me as a safer person who is actively confronting racism, that's great. But I still don't get to use that title on myself. Calling oneself an ally takes away the agency and denies the expertise of targets of oppression in that particular oppression. I've seen various cisgender people spout really terrible transphobic bullshit, then try to cover their asses by saying "No, it's ok, don't worry! I'm an ally!" Trans people (including me) are experts in what it's like to be trans. By extension, trans people are experts in how to not be oppressive toward trans people. For someone to call themselves an ally to trans people is to say that they know exactly how to confront cissexism/transphobia. Unfortunately, when we act in solidarity with targets of oppression, we are bound to screw up occasionally. This does not mean that we are bad people, it means that we live in an oppressive culture and unlearning oppression is a lifelong process. If I call myself an ally to people of color, I've in effect said that I've reached a state of perfection and I don't have any unlearning left to do, which is blatantly false. Allyship is a state to work toward, with the understanding that we may never actually reach it.

It should go without saying, but targets of oppression are experts in their oppression

Targets of oppression are experts in that particular oppression – listen to them! This can't be stressed enough! If a trans person tells you that you're being transphobic, you need to shut up and listen to them and believe them. If a person of color tells me I've done something racist, my job is to listen to them, believe them, and stop doing whatever it was that was racist. Even if you are a target of other oppressions, you are not an expert in an oppression from which you receive privilege. Believe me, I can identify transphobia when I see it. I have a harder time identifying racism because as a white person, that is not my expertise. Every time you tell me that I'm wrong, what you're doing isn't actually transphobic, you're in effect telling me I don't really understand transphobia, and I get really angry at you for assuming you're more of an expert in my own experience than I am.

But why won't you educate me?!?

It is not the responsibility of targets of oppression to educate agents about that oppression. I get really tired of well-meaning cis-gender people who want me to explain to them (in a friendly, non-threatening tone, of course) all about how I'm oppressed. Expecting a target of oppression to educate you is tokenizing. We are not here to teach you. When you ask a target to explain their oppression to you, you're saying that you're too lazy to do your own research - you'd rather a target do all the work for you. Asking a target of oppression does not count as doing your own research. There are plenty of targets of oppression who have already written extensively about their oppression - use those resources!

Good job being a less shitty person! Do you want a cookie?

Working toward allyship won't earn you any awards. Always remember that anti-oppression is about the needs of targets of oppression, not about the agents of oppression. Don't expect congratulations for trying to meet some basic requirements for being a decent human being. Don't expect praise from targets of oppression for confronting what we deal with every single day of our lives.

Personal prejudice or systematic oppression?

Many people have told me, "But I like this group of people! I can't be oppressive toward them!" Wrong. Personal prejudice is not the same as systematic oppression. Although I don't harbor any intentional personal prejudice against people of color, I still have white privilege and still benefit from systematic and societal racism. (Because I live in a messed-up, racist culture, I'm sure I have unintentional personal prejudice against people of color. Part of working toward allyship is unlearning that personal prejudice.)

If you are not actively dismantling a system of oppression from which you benefit, you are complicit in the system of oppression. In other words, you are perpetuating that oppression, regardless of whether or not you think fondly of the targets of that oppression.

You're going to screw up

In the fight to dismantle oppression, we all screw up occasionally. Nobody is perfect. I make mistakes, you make mistakes, we all make mistakes. Remember, working toward allyship is a lifelong process. Getting called out for making a mistake is an honor - it means you've been given a chance to become a better person. Realizing you've screwed up shouldn't be comfortable, but it also shouldn't be cause to wallow in your own guilt. We're not going to make a different dismantling oppression if we're too busy feeling bad about ourselves. Figure out what you did wrong, learn from that mistake, be accountable, and move on.

Pleeeeeease forgive me!

When you inevitably make a mistake and are called out, don't expect forgiveness if you apologize. I'm very glad when people quickly realize they've made a mistake when I call them out, but waiting for forgiveness takes the focus of working toward allyship off the fight against oppression, and centers it on the agent who is working toward allyship. Remember, anti-oppression work is never about the desire of agents of oppression to feel good about themselves, it is about the needs of targets of oppression to not be oppressed. When you make a big deal out of just how sorry you are, it stops being about the needs of the target and focuses on just how badly you're hurt too. How hurt you are by having made a mistake (and most likely furthering my oppression) is completely irrelevant.

