

# Supporting people affected by social injustice



When violence, hate speech, or discrimination is directed at someone because of their identity, the mental health effects ripple far beyond that one person. Such injustices remind everyone who shares the same identity that they may also be vulnerable to prejudice or intolerance simply for being who they are. This can cause psychological stress in the immediate aftermath, but over time, can lead to even greater harm to mental and physical health.

Your colleagues, neighbors, friends, and family members who identify as members of groups that have been targeted can benefit from your support and allyship. But before reaching out, understand that our best intentions can sometimes lead us astray. Consider these tips to offer the right kind of support:

**Before you ask “How are you doing?” show you mean it.** We ask the question multiple times everyday, but rarely do we signal that we want to know the true answer. Let the person you’re reaching out to know your intention by prefacing the question with a statement that expresses empathy, such as “Given what’s been happening in our country right now, I wanted to check in.” Or you could share that you’ve been emotionally affected by the situation, which led you to want to check on how they’re doing, as you can imagine that the impact on them is likely to be different and more significant.

**They may not want to talk.** You may get a response that indicates that the person isn’t interested in discussing their feelings or the broader subject at this time. Let them know that if they want to talk at a later time, you’re willing, but you respect their desire to not engage right now. Consider the conversation closed unless they pick it back up.

**Less talking, more listening.** If the person opens up about how they’re doing, respond with follow-up questions that demonstrate your interest, or statements of validation like what’s described below, but avoid advice or problem solving unless they’re explicitly asking for it. Your goal is to show that you care about their experience and that you’re an attentive and empathetic listener.

**Respect their feelings.** If you share your own reaction to what’s occurred, be careful not to compare your reaction to theirs. How you respond in a given situation won’t be how others respond, and vice versa. In responding to their feelings, you could offer a statement of validation such as “It makes sense to me that you would be feeling (their stated feeling) right now” to convey a nonjudgmental and supportive stance.

**Offer ways you can support.** If you're willing, let the person know you can help by being proactive with offers of specific support, such as giving ideas for how you can help them meet their obligations at home (as a friend or neighbor) or at work (as a colleague or manager) during this difficult time.

**Learn more by doing your research.** If you decide you'd like to be an ally and want to understand more about the experiences of people in a marginalized group and how you can help, seek information from credible sources. Turn to educational materials from representative organizations and books written by people with lived experience. But make sure you don't put the burden on people from a marginalized group to educate you on their identity and the associated history of oppression. Show them you've done your diligence by seeking out resources first.

**See or hear something? Say something.** If you overhear someone making statements or behaving in a way that demonstrates unfair assumptions, stereotypes, or discriminatory treatment based on someone's identity, speak up as an ally. Challenge biases by asking why that person would make such a statement, and reset expectations for what's acceptable by letting that person know that their words or behavior cause harm and aren't tolerated.

If someone at work discloses that their mental health is suffering, remind them that they can find support through their health plan or EAP.