

## What it is

A process to help groups practice working with institutionalized social oppression<sup>1</sup>

## What it can do

This tool can assist you to:

- o Raise awareness of group members about the unconscious misinformation all of us carry about people from diverse cultures and other social identity groups.
- o Help group members to gain deeper understanding of where other people are “coming from”.
- o Provide group members practice in giving clear feedback and speaking powerfully about an issue where they feel vulnerable.
- o Enhance the health of the entire group by bringing the hidden conversations that happen privately into the public space.
- o Enable group members to learn together how to have conversations about challenging topics in a safe and productive way
- o Help group members better understand each other’s sensitivities

## When to use it

This powerful group practice is often first taught to a group in an extended team meeting or retreat setting. The group might then agree to continue working with this practice over time as part of their regular organizational meetings.

## How it works

### **Step 1**    **Set Context, by saying something like:**

- Because of the existence of institutionalized social oppression, we all come into this group with misinformation about who each of us really is.
- We come with lies about each other and ourselves that reinforce a system of mistreatment and privilege.
- *Give examples, such as:*
  - o A white woman jokingly calls a black colleague “boy”.
  - o A male boss asks his female assistant to go get him some coffee.
  - o A woman of color says that all white men are power hungry.

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<sup>1</sup> Used with permission of Yeshi Neumann who created this particular version of “Ouch and Educate.” Thanks also to Joan Lester and Leslie C. Aguilar for their various roles in birthing and popularizing this wonderful practice.

- Someone asks an Asian-American colleague, *“Don’t you Asians all excel at math?”*
- Someone makes a joke that negatively characterizes a social group.
- While no harm may have been intended, within the context of social oppression to which we have all been subjected, such comments can land on people in ways that hurt or dehumanize them
- We assume good intention on the part of everyone in this group and at the same time we assume none of us is immune from misinformation that circulates as part of social oppression and is one of the factors that keeps social oppression in place.
- Internalized oppression may keep us from speaking out. The voice of internalized oppression says things like:
  - *“Oh, it’s not important.”*
  - *“I don’t want to make waves.”*
  - *“Oh, that person probably didn’t mean anything offensive – so I won’t say anything.”*
- Speaking out is an important and empowering act of resistance to oppression.

## **Step 2 Give instructions on how to express the “ouch.”**

- Raise hand in the midst of whatever is happening. (without actually interrupting another speaker) and say “I have an ouch.”
- Use the following model for expressing the ouch. It is vital not to blame or attack the “ouch” and to take responsibility for our own responses:
  - When you, [name of person], said... [e.g., “boy”]
  - I felt... [insert “feeling” word, such as scared, upset, angry].  
NOT: I feel like you... did this... to me.
  - Because I... [talk about yourself, not the other person]
  - For example:
    - *“When someone says “boy” to me, even when they are joking, it brings up for me the whole history of my people being called “boy” during slavery and I experience it as a put down and feel humiliated.”*
    - *“When you asked me to get coffee, I felt upset because as a woman I was reminded of experiences I have had of not being valued for who I am and the contribution I have to make, and only seen as someone who serves others.”*

- It is Important to emphasize that “ouchee” talks about how it landed on them, not you (“oucher”) did something to me (like disrespected me), which assumes “ouchee” knows the “oucher’s” intention, and blames them.
- When the “oucher” is not blamed for a behavior which comes out of lack of awareness, then they don’t need to defend themselves and therefore can be more open to learning.

**Step 3 Give instructions on how to *receive* and *respond* to the “ouchee”.**

- The “ouchers” do not defend themselves by stating their good intention, or by explaining what they meant.
- They respond to the “ouchee” by saying either:
  - *“I hear what you are saying to me.”* or
  - *“Thank you for letting me know.”* – as an acknowledgement of the gift of the information they have been given.

**Step 4 Create relative safety for both “Oucher” and “Ouchee”.**

- The “ouchees” are not obligated to account for their response after the interaction.
- Otherwise the “ouchee” could be put in the position of having to take care of the “oucher.”
  - For example: It often happens that white people, without realizing it, put people of color in position of having to somehow absolve them of their guilt.
- If the “oucher” would like to follow up to better understand the issue at hand, they can ask the “ouchee” if they would be willing to discuss it.
- If the “ouchee” says “No,” that’s it. The “oucher” can explore the issue later with other group members.