

How to Interact with People Who Are Different

Margaret Machara, Ph.D., CFLE, Professor, Department of Human Sciences, TSU
Contact: 615-963-5628, mmachara@tnstate.edu
Beatrice Harris, Ph.D., Associate Professor & Extension Specialist, TSU



“Variety’s the very spice of life, that gives all its flavor”

— William Cowper

The United States is extremely diverse. There are people of different nationalities, races, ethnicities, belief systems, languages, sexual orientations, and genders. Although relationships are the foundation of our society, it may be difficult to interact with people we think of as different from ourselves. The following guide can make it easier.

GET READY TO FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE

As humans, we are most comfortable with those that look, think, and act like us. It’s reinforcement of our worth. So, interacting with someone who is different can feel uncomfortable. Growth comes from that discomfort. Those are the situations that you have the potential to learn rather than staying “safe” in your choices.



YOU’RE GOING TO MAKE MISTAKES

There will be times that you say the wrong thing, ask an inappropriate question, or make a misguided assumption. Accept that it will happen.... own it and learn from it³. Even if you didn’t intend to cause harm, acknowledging that your action had a negative impact on someone else can help you both move on from it. If you wait for perfection, you’ll never grow.

DON’T EXPECT OTHERS TO TEACH YOU



If you don’t know much about other nationalities, races, sexual orientations, etc., take the initiative to learn. No one person represents their whole group, there are many parts to each of us. So, no one can speak for their entire group. The other person is not responsible for your education². No one can know everything about every group;

but being willing and open to learning goes a long way. The Action Plan below gives some ideas for ways to educate yourself.

BE QUIET AND LISTEN

The best way to learn about others is to really listen. Listen to understand instead of just waiting for your turn to talk. Sometimes the other person may tell you things that are hard to hear. Don’t dismiss what they tell you. Their experience may not be the same as your experience. That doesn’t make their experiences invalid. Try not to get defensive. Sometimes it’s not about you and sometimes it is.

If it isn't about you, don't take it personally. If it is about you, listen to learn how to do things differently. If an action causes harm to someone else, even if you didn't mean it to, it still hurts them. It's okay to ask questions to understand the experience better; but don't use questions to minimize their experience or defend yourself.

TREAT OTHERS AS THEY WANT TO BE TREATED

Growing up, many of us learned the "Golden Rule" to treat others how we would want to be treated. While the sentiment is a good one, in practice things may need to be a little different. We are all different. Some of us may be very affectionate and enjoy "hands-on" interaction, while others enjoy more personal space. Some of us may be very reserved with our private lives, while others are willing to share private aspects. Variety makes society a wonderful place, but it's important to respect how the other person wants to be treated rather than imposing our preferences on them. Not sure what their preferences are? Ask! That shows them the respect that you want shown to you.

BE AN INFORMED ALLY

Shirley Chisholm once said, "If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair". Part of being an ally is using your influence to make sure that others' needs are recognized and addressed. Our society improves when all the voices are heard.

If you have a seat at the table, pull up a chair for someone who doesn't. Give up your seat on the bus for someone who doesn't usually get a change to move forward. "A rising tide lifts all boats". So, being an informed ally for others' success will help us all.

CREATE AN ACTION PLAN

The desire for change is a great start; but action plans lead to true behavior change.¹

- Decide on specific actions to take
 - Read a book by or about someone different
 - Watch a movie by or about someone different
 - Attend an event celebrating a group that is different
- Set some time goals
 - When will you complete your action by
- Schedule time to check in with yourself
 - How did the activity make you feel?
 - What did you learn from it?
- Plan your next steps

MOVING FORWARD



There is a Chinese Proverb that states, "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now." It is never too late to take steps to make yourself more competent interacting with others. Self-awareness gives you the courage and the motivation to take those steps towards authentic understanding.

References:

- ¹Koring, M., S. et al. (2012). Synergistic Effects of Planning and Self-Efficacy on Physical Activity. *Health Education & Behavior*, 39, 152-158.
- ²Oluo, I (2019). So you want to talk about race. Seal Press. New York, NY.
- ³Diangelo, R. (2018). White Fragility. Beacon Press. Boston, MA.