



How to Respond to Sexist Remarks

By Alan Berkowitz

Much progress has been made in addressing sexism in American culture. While the profeminist men's movement has contributed to this evolution, it is undeniable that there is much more to be accomplished. Many of us can attest that remarks and behaviors that would have seemed inoffensive or "normal" some years ago are now correctly labeled as sexist, inappropriate, and in need of a response. In the language of bystander intervention theory and research now, more than in the past, we "notice the event," "interpret it as a problem," and "feel responsible for responding to it." The question is: *how to respond?* What are some tools and ideas for effectively, appropriately, and safely responding to sexist and other prejudicial language that we experience in our daily lives?

The Spring issue of this magazine included an article, "Unbecoming a Man," an excerpt from Allan G. Johnson's memoir of the same title. The article provides an excellent illustration of this dilemma—how to appropriately respond to a clearly offensive sexist remark, even more so when it seems that our friends are not themselves uncomfortable.

On the way to a regular weekly dinner, Allan and three male friends stop at a liquor store so he can buy some beers for their meal. Overwhelmed by the plethora of choices and brands, he stands for a while at the cooler. Grabbing something and taking it to the cash register he comments to his waiting friends and the clerk: "Too many choices!" to which the clerk promptly retorts: "Wrong time of the month?"

Allan is shocked by the clerk's offensive remark, disparaging to him and to women, and does not know how to respond; his friends remain silent. The article goes on to describe his internal conflict and remorse at not knowing how to intervene against the inappropriate remark and the oppressive, negative effect of his friends' silence: "And I of course, was also silent, letting it pass rather than risk making it worse, becoming smaller than myself in the temporary safety that I had learned to seek out as a boy among boys."

Many of us can testify that this is a common experience—choosing silence as the safe way out in order to not challenge a remark, or

our friends' silence, or to have our "masculinity questioned" and then, later on, regretting our inaction. Years ago, at a sexual assault prevention conference, I arranged for all the male prevention experts in attendance to have lunch together to discuss common experiences and challenges. Almost all agreed that their biggest challenge was not knowing how to respond appropriately to offensive remarks and behaviors by men they knew.

Much of my professional work the past few decades has focused on educating myself and others on how to address this challenge—to identify and teach effective, safe, and appropriate responses when faced with inappropriate remarks and behaviors. The liquor store example can be used to illustrate what an effective response might look like. It is my hope that this discussion will help to alleviate the fears that freeze us into non-response and instead stir our creative juices to help identify ways we can address the sexism that exists around us, as well as the silence of the men we know which serves to enable it.

First, we must give ourselves permission to acknowledge that in some cases we may choose not to respond. This may be for safety reasons, when faced with a significant power differential between us and the person engaging in the behavior; for personality and cultural reasons; or even for practical reasons. For example, if I am on the way to picking up a child from after-school care and am late, I may feel that I do not have time to engage with an offensive comment made while rushing in and out of a convenience store. When choosing not to respond, what is important is that we feel comfortable with our choice. Often this is not the case, and we may feel guilty and disappointed that we allowed an inappropriate behavior to go unchallenged, carrying these memories for years. The "Unbecoming a Man" example is a case in point.

What then can we do if we want to act? How to deal with our friends' silence? What, in other words, would actually be "Becoming a Man"? There is no one correct response for a particular situation, and that it is not appropriate for us to define for others what they should

do. What we can strive for instead is to offer more understanding and response options so that more people feel comfortable in doing something more of the time in situations where we and others are uncomfortable and previously may have been silent.

In some cases a direct, more confrontational remark may be appropriate. For the situation in the liquor store, examples might include:

“I am offended by your comment.”

“I don’t appreciate the implication of your remark.”

“I haven’t seen you being so decisive.”

Confrontational responses require a certain degree of confidence and the ability to be assertive and may not be appropriate in particular circumstances, or may not be comfortable for certain individuals. In these situations, an indirect remark may be more appropriate. Indirect remarks are especially useful in situations that are more impersonal and public, when a confrontational response might be considered culturally inappropriate, or when the other person has more status, power or is physically intimidating. Responding indirectly could include making a comment that illustrates that you choose to ignore the remark, or alternatively, offering a response that challenges the underlying assumption of the remark.

In the liquor store example, when the clerk says, “Wrong time of the month?” you could respond in any of the following ways:

“I was under the assumption that ‘haste makes waste.’”

“I’m more interested in having a nice dinner with my friends than in what beer we drink.”

“Actually, I was so enthralled by all the great beer choices you have I couldn’t decide. What do you recommend?”

“Personally, I don’t mind being seen as indecisive, even if that’s not the reason.”

“Actually, my doctor has determined that my indecision gene is on my Y chromosome, so that isn’t a good explanation.”

“Many women I know are more decisive than me all four weeks of the month.”

The first three responses do not address the underlying sexism of the remark, but still let the person and the other bystanders know that you do not agree with it and are not going to be silent about it. Often a remark that changes the subject results in a shift in energy with a new conversation ensuing—perhaps in this case about the dinner plans. In the event that others who hear a remark are secretly uncomfortable, a distraction response offers the opportunity for everyone to switch the focus of the conversation.

The remaining three responses more directly address the underlying assumption of the remark—i.e., that women are indecisive during menstruation and that a man who is indecisive is less of a man by virtue of “acting like a woman.” In my work teaching options for intervention I find that indirect responses that challenge the sexist assumption underlying a remark can be powerful and welcomed, offering many who previously were passive bystanders a way to comfortably intervene. Another example of a situation in which an indirect response could be effective would be, when an academic

colleague comments that “too many undeserving women are getting tenure,” to reply: “Really? Many of my best and brightest professors in college were women.”

In addition to responding directly to the person making the remark, one could involve the other bystanders, for example, gesturing to the friends present and commenting: “Actually, these guys know that I am indecisive most days of the month.” You could also engage the other bystanders after the fact, asking, “What did you think of what the clerk said to me?” Whether or not we decide to respond to a situation, we can engage other bystanders in a discussion and analysis of what happened and prepare them and ourselves to respond effectively in the future. It may be helpful to know that other men are also frequently uncomfortable with inappropriate remarks but we may incorrectly assume that they are not.

In my research (and that of others) on norm misperceptions it has been demonstrated that it is common for a majority of men to be uncomfortable with sexist behavior but to assume that others are not. This is also true for others: straight individuals with respect to homophobic behavior, white individuals in relation to racism, etc. Revealing the “true norm of discomfort” provides us with support from allies to respond in the future, and also undermines the belief that we are alone in our discomfort. Sexism is perpetuated, in part, when we incorrectly assume that other men are not uncomfortable with it, and when silence is misinterpreted as agreement.

A final option. Engage the person making the remark in conversation. This might not be appropriate with a sales clerk, but it is with a friend. I could respond to his saying, “Wrong time of the month?” by asking, “What do you mean by that?” or “Are all of the women you know indecisive during *that* time of the month?” or even, “It seems that indecision really bothers you; do you want to share why?” Engaging the other person in an open-ended, non-judgmental conversation can be effective in helping them to evaluate the assumptions of a remark and to introduce cognitive dissonance in relation to it. (This particular skill is taught by the National Coalition Building Institute and is called “Shifting Attitudes.”)

Remember, we shouldn’t be surprised when offensive remarks are made. They are part of the reality that we have committed ourselves to change—in ourselves, in our friends, and in society. In finding an effective response to such comments, rather than be put off we can leave aside our surprise and shock and engage our natural creative intelligence and passion for social change. This is a skill that evolves over time, through practice, through trial and error until it eventually becomes a “talent.” You may be pleasantly surprised when other bystanders step in to agree with or support your intervention. When confronted with sexist remarks and behavior we can find our humanity, our capacity for “Becoming a Man.”



Alan Berkowitz is an activist, educator, researcher and scholar who works with the military, higher education, and communities to prevent sexual assault and to foster social justice. The material in this article is derived from his book Response Ability: A Complete Guide to Bystander Behavior, as well as a book chapter titled: “Using How College Men Feel About Being Men and ‘Doing the Right Thing’ to Promote Men’s Development” published in Masculinities in Higher Education: Theoretical and Practical Considerations. For more information about Alan and his work go to his website, www.alanberkowitz.com, or e-mail him at alan@fltg.net.