

How to Call Attention to a Harmful Situation

Developing norms that foster supportive spaces at school

When gathering during school at the beginning of the year, or throughout the year, it is good practice to highlight the importance of ensuring that staff and students who are marginalized feel a sense of safety and belonging at school. One way to do this, is for staff and students to take responsibility for words spoken and actions taken. Sometimes things are said or done that may cause harm, even when that was not the intent. This is an opportunity for learning and growth. Creating norms, and sharing language for immediate and long-term feedback, can help in making sure that harmful words are recognized and corrected, to stop ongoing harm. Preparing for this before may help staff and students be more mindful of their words and actions at school.

In introducing this topic, it is important to set the tone by summarizing these key points:



1. When you witness a harmful situation, it is appropriate to call attention to the issue by letting that person know their words or actions have had a negative impact

2. Calling attention to the situation can be immediate while the action is taking place to prevent ongoing harm

3. After the incident, calling attention to the harmful words or actions can also occur. This allows you to provide extended feedback to the person who has left a negative impact with their thoughts or actions.

While creating or revisiting norms, consider this resource about how you can call attention to a harmful situation.

NOTE: Calling attention to a harmful situation is an opportunity for allies to intentionally support people who are Black, Indigenous and racialized. There are power dynamics to consider, and individuals need to recognize their own personal boundaries before proceeding. For example, staff and students who are Black, Indigenous or racialized may feel the need to respond. It is important to remind the space that calling attention to harmful situations is not the responsibility of those impacted. Their well-being and safety are most important. So, all members need to be observant and respectful and should be prepared to note instances of harm if they occur.



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Immediate feedback:

Calling someone's attention to the harm they are causing in real-time will likely feel difficult and uncomfortable. Still, in certain situations, it is necessary when you need to let someone know that their words or actions are unacceptable, and when you need to interrupt to prevent ongoing harm. This might sound like, "I feel like I need to tell you that your comment didn't feel okay to me." Examples of conversation starters include:

"I'm curious. What is your intention when you say that?"

"Okay, I'm having a strong reaction to that, and I need to let you know why."

"I need you to know how your comment is landing with me."

"I wonder if you are considering the impact of your words."

"Why do you think that's the case? Why do you believe that to be true?"

"It sounded like you said _____ before. Is that really what you meant?"

"I'm wondering how your own comfort level, assumptions, expectations, and experiences influence your beliefs/decisions?"

"It sounded like you're making some assumptions that we need to unpack/talk about."

"What sort of impact do you think your decision/comment/action might have had?"

"What's making you the most fearful, nervous, uncomfortable or worried?"

Longer feedback:

Offering the space for a conversation after an incident is an opportunity for the person causing harm to seek to learn more and is focused on reflection, not reaction. This might sound like, "you shared something with the class about my cultural history...what sort of impact do you think your comment might have?" Examples of conversation starters include:

Think about what these terms mean, open a discussion about your group norms, and create a process for giving and receiving feedback unique to your group. To do this work appropriately, a collective and collaborative approach is needed.

NOTE: You can respond immediately and follow up with an extended feedback opportunity as well.



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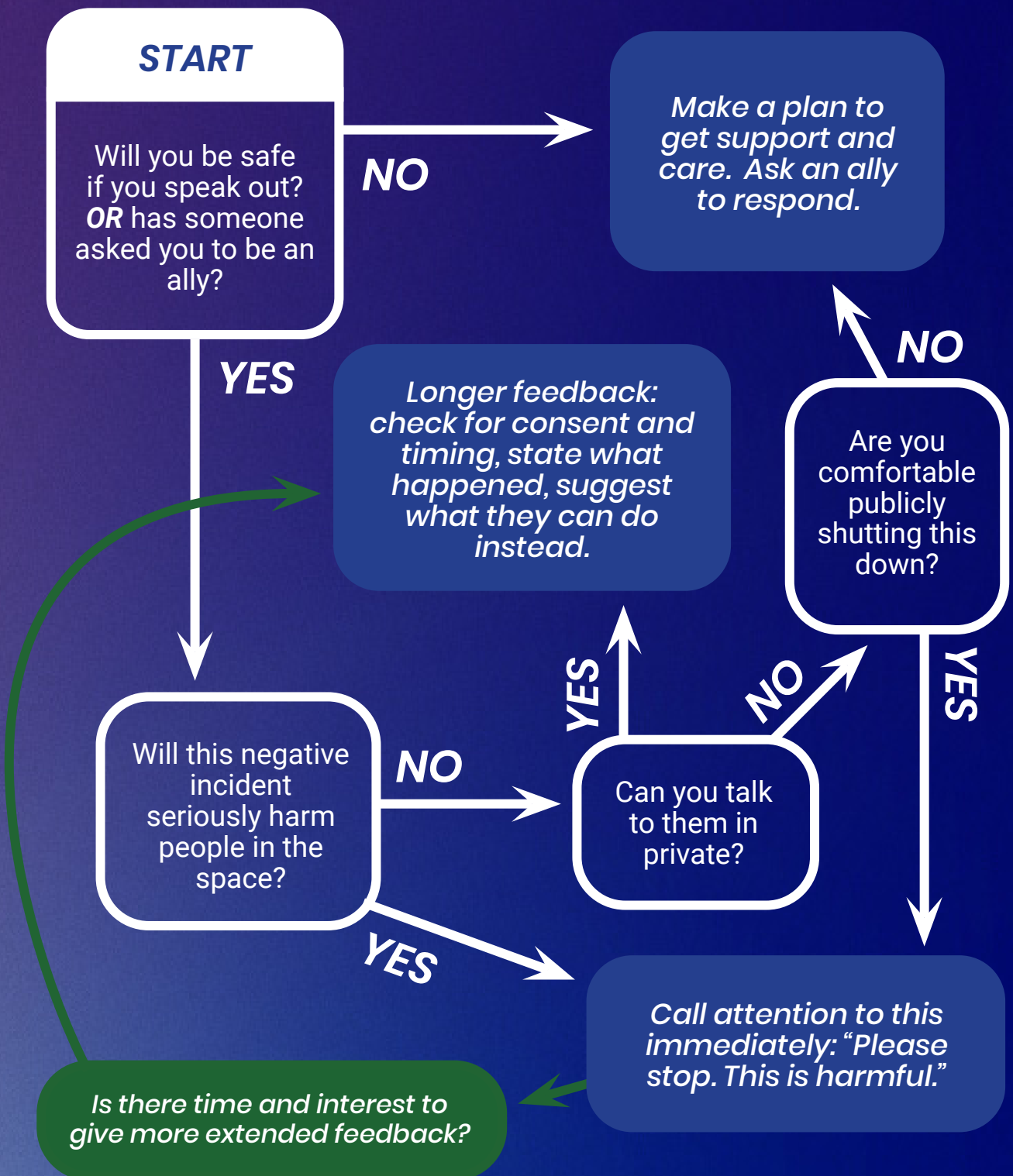


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You can always reach out to trusted adults, friends, colleagues, or peers for support when having difficult conversations.



Access the full resource here, for more information.

The information and visual presented were adapted from Lukayo. It is considered community knowledge and was taught to Lukayo by Melanie Jubinville-Stafford.



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