Ways to Defuse Offensive Talk About HIV

Thanks to Donald Trump, we're honing the art of shutting down distasteful speech.

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Put yourself in this situation: You're at a social event—an office party or a church potluck, for example—you're having a great time and then someone starts talking about "those" people with HIV and how they deserve what they got. (I know, hard to imagine, right? But just bear with me.)

How do you respond to the situation, especially if you don't want to reveal your own status or cause a scene—perhaps, for example, the offensive person is your boss.

Here's some great advice, courtesy of Donald Trump. Actually, it's from The New York Times, but it arrives in an article that addresses the degrading language we've all been subjected to during this election season. Although Trump hasn't directly targeted people living with HIV (yet), this campaign cycle has provided endless chances to hone etiquette skills to keep us sane, regardless of our minority status.

In the newspaper's Science section, Benedict Carey and Jan Hoffman offer "Lessons in the Delicate Art of Confronting Offensive Speech." They write:

> Researchers have detailed the difficulty of confronting prejudice, but they have also found that even the politest of objections—or subtle corrections to loaded words—can almost instantly curb a speaker's behavior. With a clearer understanding of the dynamics of such confrontation, psychologists say, people can develop tactics that can shut down the unsavory talk without ruining relationships, even when the offender has more status or power: a fraternity president, say, or a team captain or employer.

What tactics? One plan is simply to change the subject. According to the authors, it's important to know that you don't have to call out or shame the speaker—especially if it may result in retaliation or a strained relationship.

One way to do this is to make the comment about you and not the speaker. If the person says something inappropriate about gay men, for example, you could simply say, "Talk like that makes me uncomfortable; one of my best friends is gay."

You can also use humor to defuse a situation. And, like most life skills, you can practice your

responses ahead of time. Just image various situations—we all know the types of comments we're likely to hear—and think about what you'd say. When you have the response in the back of your mind, ready to go, you'll be less likely to get upset and say something so harsh that could backfire.

Why is it worth your time to undertake this voluntary self-training? Because "subtle objections can stop people in midsentence, in some cases prompting later reflection," according to the Times.

What's more, if you stay silent, then you risk becoming complicit; the speaker might take your silence as a signal that you approve.

In other words, if you hear something, say something.

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