

# Dear Men Who Wish To Be Allies to Women

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Audra Wolowiec, “(h)ear”, 2016

Hello, I'm glad that you care about women's rights and want to be an ally! This makes you a decent human being. Not to mention on the right side of history. You may have witnessed an upsurge of toxic masculinity lately—say, for example, the entire second presidential debate—drawing attention to what has always been here under the surface but perhaps has not always been as visible to you. You might have even experienced some degree of guilt or shame for being a man when some men are acting in such vile, repugnant ways and making decisions *for* women without actually listening *to* women. We are all trying our best to be good people in the world and this shit is complicated. But there are a few things you might want to know. I wrote this for you.

**1. It is not women's responsibility to educate you.** Teach yourself about sexism and misogyny and about how to recreate our culture to eliminate them. Just as it is white people's responsibility to educate themselves and figure out how to dismantle the racist culture we made, you men, the beneficiaries of our patriarchal culture, need to figure out how to undo your sexist and misogynistic ideas, belief systems, and behaviors. You need to figure out how to change internally and externally so that we live in a culture that truly values and supports women. [Here's a great place to start.](#)

**2. Don't ask women to do additional emotional labor.** Women have been socialized to be caretakers and nurturers. Some of us embrace this role and others of us don't, but none of us want to do this all the time. What does emotional labor look like? Listening to others talk about their problems, processing issues and providing advice, caring for others' feelings, offering space and time and, sometimes, physical affection in the form of hugs and handholding. Because women have been socially conditioned to see this labor as part of our role as women and because people of all genders have been conditioned to see women as caretakers, you might not realize when you are asking women to do this. Check in with the women in your life before you ask them to provide emotional support; make sure they have the time, energy, and resources to offer it. Make sure you have their permission. Notice the amount of space you take up in a conversation. Does this sound exhausting? It is. And this is the work women do *all the time*. We do this work on top of the work of walking through the world while female, which I assure you is time-consuming, laborious, hard, and often demoralizing. Lastly, don't engage women you don't know or barely know in intense emotional revelations. I don't need to know from the man in line at the grocery about his recent traumas. I don't need to deal with the cantankerous discharge of a stranger's horrible day. You are taking an emotional dump all over us. Take care of your own emotional needs.

**3. Think about the space you take up.** In conversations. In board rooms. At public events. On conference panels. Walking down the street. Think about your proximity to women. Ask yourself whether you are giving them enough space: to talk, to move, to exist. This is especially true if you encounter a woman alone. Give her space.

**4. Do your homework and seek out women's perspectives.** Read articles and books about [intersectional feminism](#). Read articles and books that have nothing to do with feminism but that are written by women. Look at your bookshelf. Is it full of mostly male authors? Think of why that might be. Then, [commit to exclusively](#) reading work by women—from all different countries, with different backgrounds and identities—for a week, a month, [a year](#) or more. Ask the women in your life for recommendations of books that changed their lives, books where they felt deeply heard or seen. Read those books.

**5. Ask the women in your life to [share their stories with you](#).** Be okay if they don't want to. And if they do want to, *really listen*. [These cascading stories](#) are often [fraught](#), violent, and deeply sad. You might feel shocked, angry, or full of sorrow that someone you know and love had to go through these experiences. Don't shut down because you feel uncomfortable or even complicit. Don't try to make the stories better. Don't dismiss women's words, in your mind or to the woman you are listening to. Don't find reasons to excuse others' bad behavior. Choose to show up. Choose to continue to listen.

**6. If you are a maker, think about the things you make.** Remember that the work you offer into the world as an artist, writer, filmmaker, musician, or other maker is reflecting a certain perspective: yours. Think about what you are making and what it says to those that engage with it. Are all your female characters one-dimensional? Are they always to blame for the woes of your male protagonist? How many women are you interviewing for your documentary? Did you integrate a mix of voices in terms of ethnicity, nationality, socio-economic class, ability levels, size and shape, sexuality, placement along the gender binary? What are your songs about and what worldview do they reflect? Is the art you make reinforcing problematic cultural narratives?

**7. Find other men doing this work.** Learn from them, share resources. And then—and this is really important—have conversations with your male friends, colleagues, and neighbors about sexism and misogyny. Instigate the difficult conversations. Ask hard questions of yourselves and one another. You have likely lived most of your life without having to think about these things. Women haven't had this luxury. Be uncomfortable. But also, find support in doing this work.

**8. Respect women's boundaries.** No means no, period. You have no right to a woman's body, time, energy, attention, respect, and so on. Relatedly, if a woman gives clear signals, verbally or otherwise, that she does not want you to interact with her, leave her alone.

**9. Don't police women's bodies or voices.** Women are autonomous beings, and contrary to cultural messages that say otherwise, we don't exist for the pleasure of others. What we wear, where we walk, what we do or don't do with our bodies is no one's concern but our own. Similarly, women are allowed to have our own perspectives (and to articulate them in the ways we choose), and just because a woman disagrees with you does not mean that she doesn't understand the complexities of the situation and needs an explanation.

**10. Doing this work doesn't make you a hero, but it does make you a better human.** All of us should be feminists because being a feminist means you believe women are equal and should be treated as such. You are doing the right thing. But you don't deserve accolades or applause, just like a father doesn't deserve these for changing his child's diaper. You do get the reward of being a woke man, a man who is moving through the world with integrity.

**11. Realize that doing this work is not a one-shot deal.** If you want to be an ally, it means you commit to a lifetime of continuing education. It means you look hard at your own shit. It means you look for ways to support the women in your life. It means you determine ways to work on a community and systemic level. You will be uncomfortable a lot of the time. You will likely get defensive. But you keep trying.

**12. Choose to create a culture that inherently values women. Make this list obsolete.**