

**TAKING THE FIRST STEP:
SUGGESTIONS TO
PEOPLE CALLED OUT
FOR ABUSIVE BEHAVIOR**

BY WISPY COCKLES

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wispy cockles currently resides in Richmond VA where he organizes with the Richmond Queer Space Project and spins records with the 215noise crew. He can be contacted at 120 w marshall st or by e-mailing wispy@defenestrator.org

is far from over. Bad habits are easily taken up again, and many times it is easy to assume that we are not wielding power over someone. We must persistently question this assumption just as we would demand that any assumption be questioned, lest it become dogma.

It is crucial that we learn to ask for consent from our sexual partners. It is crucial that we learn to recognize aggressive and passive aggressive abuse in its various emotional, economic, physical, and sexual manifestations, and that we stop it before it escalates to more severe and harmful levels. We need to call it out when we are aware of it in other people, as well as ourselves. This process is a process of overcoming of oppression, of rejecting the roles of oppressor and oppressed. It is a path that leads to freedom, and a path that is formed by walking. Will you take the first step?

INTRODUCTION

What you see before you is a work in progress and will likely remain so. I write this to encourage dialogue and to provide a resource to people dealing with difficult situations. I do not write this to provide answers to every situation where someone is accused of abuse. Every situation will have unique characteristics that require unique responses and courses of action. What I hope is that this will spark a dialogue about how people accused of rape or abuse or sexual assault should conduct themselves regardless of their feelings of guilt or innocence.

As radical communities, we need to have extensive dialogue about how to deal with abusive behavior, and this is a single current within that dialogue. We should ask ourselves many questions. What responsibilities does the accused have to upholding a “process of accountability” regardless of their feelings of guilt or innocence? As survivors and communities how do we hold abusers responsible? How do we create strong communities that are ready to deal with difficult and controversial situations without factionalizing or falling apart? Is it a priority to determine “guilt” or “innocence” or is it a priority to create processes that demand accountability and deconstruct privilege?

There are some aspects of the ten suggestions I would like to explain first and foremost. We find ourselves in a world where the overwhelming amount of abuse occurs with men preying on women. It is a patriarchal phenomenon. In this document I have used the gender-neutral term s/he. I wish for survivors that fall outside of the male=assailant/female=survivor model to have visibility. I wish to speak to all abusers regardless of their gender. It is not an attempt to cloak the fact that abuse is largely perpetuated by men against women.

Also in this document, I do address people who feel that they have been falsely accused of whatever they’ve been accused of doing. My reason for doing this is mainly, because people who are in denial need to be spoken to, and they need to be held to standards of conduct that support an atmosphere that chal-

lenges privilege and oppression. It goes without saying that in the majority of instances when people are called out for abuse it is because, in fact, they abused the person(s). However, there exist a minority of instances in which people are falsely accused of things.

This writing comes from the context of my own experience of dealing with accusations of sexually coercive behavior. Accusations which were later revealed, by the person my accusers had pegged to be the “survivor”, to have no validity. However, there were a good three months where, due to miscommunication and misunderstanding*, I honestly believed I was being accused by someone of manipulative and sexually coercive behavior. I did a lot of self-investigation and soul searching. Luckily, I had some great people to help me process through my conflicting feeling surrounding dealing with these very frightening accusations of abuse. This is my way of giving back to all those who gave so much to me, and to a radical community which inspires me. It is a product of a very real, very intense lived experience facing accusations of abuse, and the reflection that followed.

I would like to say, in my opinion, that false accusations of abuse are themselves a form of emotional abuse. However, it is very important to keep a perspective about such things. The priority, in any situation, where someone is calling out someone else of abuse must clearly lay with the needs and desires of those claiming to have survived abuse. This is not to just err on the side of caution, as false accusations are by most accounts an extreme rarity. It is to support the beginnings of communities that trust those who stand up to those that hurt them. It is to support those that occupy the front lines in the struggle against hierarchy. Those beautiful souls who take the struggle home, where its most difficult, and those whose strength should be displayed, if they wish, on the covers of radical tabloids alongside photos of black blockers doing property alteration. Their militancy doesn't leave them when the demo or deed is done, they live it.

**Take my advice, don't use e-mail to communicate about serious and emotionally charged issues.*

ceptable. You need to hear the criticisms and anger of the survivor(s) and their allies. As well you need to stop others from engaging in silencing behavior. Let them know that if they truly care about you that instead of defending your character and reacting to the accusations they need to help you examine yourself and figure out ways of transforming dominating behaviors.

9. Respond To The Wishes of The Survivor and The Wishes Of The Community

Taking responsibility for our harmful actions is an integral part of the healing process. You will need to respond to the wishes of the survivor and the community not just for their healing, but yours as well. If they wish that you be suspended from certain projects/activities, or that you engage in a batterers/assailants program, or that you do book reports on books about ending rape and abuse, or if they want you to do anything within the realm of possibility, don't argue with them, give them what they ask for. You need to show the survivor and the community that you are acting in good faith and that you are ready to deal with your problems of abuse or at the very least that you are willing to sincerely investigate the possibility that you engaged in abusive behavior. You need to show the survivor and the community that you respect their autonomy and their ability to make decisions that meet their needs and desires for safety, healing, and ending oppression. Again if you want to live in a world free of abuse, rape, and oppression you will support survivor autonomy and community self-determination even if you feel you are being “falsely accused”. . Do not engage in the silencing behavior of attacking the demands and process of the survivor(s) or the community. This is what abusers and their supporters typically do to create a smokescreen of issues to take the heat off of themselves.

10. Take Responsibility. Stop Abuse and Rape Before It Starts.

It takes a lot of courage and self-knowledge to admit that you've hurt someone, that you compromised their dignity and self worth, or that you used power over someone in the worst ways. It takes a lot of sincerity to make an apology without expecting to be applauded or thanked for it. However, this is what it will take to start overcoming our abusive tendencies. To know that you have wronged someone and to do otherwise is to perpetuate the hierarchy. It is to be more than simply complicit within it, but to actively support it. It will take honesty, diligent self-investigation, and compassion to start to overcome our abusive tendencies. Once you're able to admit that you have a problem with (sometimes or always) abusing people you can begin to learn how and why you do it. You can learn early warning signs that you're slipping back into old patterns, and you'll be better able to check yourself. My life has been a life of unlearning such patterns of abuse, of learning to reject the roles of both the abuser and the abused, and it

The flyer went on and on about the disparities between these women's stories and the "truth". This is one blatant example of silencing behavior, but it can act in far more subtle ways.

Silencing behavior is ANY behavior that attempts to make the survivor of abuse out to the perpetrator of misinformation. It is any behavior that attempts to make the abuser out to be the victim. It very quickly puts into question the character of the person calling out an abuser. Often it leads to a backlash against them both explicit (threats, harassment, violence) and implicit (endless questioning, non supportive behavior i.e. "I don't want to get involved in this" or "I'm hearing a lot of different stories"). Silencing behavior creates an atmosphere where people fear and don't call out their abusers, and therefore an atmosphere where abuse flourishes.

However, this does not mean that you should not speak of how you experienced the situation(s) differently from the other person(s) calling you out. It simply means that it is your responsibility to do so in a way that is respectful and that does not help to foster an atmosphere of silence around abuse. You may need to relate your experiences to those with which you have close friendships/work- ing relationships and to those that approach you, but as I said above speak for yourself. Do not intersperse their account with yours to illustrate the inconsisten- cies that you perceive. Do not relate the person(s) stories for them. Do not go on and on about how they should have called you out in a different manner. Do not talk about their shortcomings in the relationship/ friendship. Do not cast yourself in the role of the victim of a "witch hunt" or "cointelpro". Do not assert that they are lying, and if your account differs from theirs make it clear that this is how you and only you account for your experiences(s) of the situation(s). Let what you say be limited exclusively to your recollection. If you feel the need to vent find a good person to vent to whose outside of your immediate social scene/com- munity (if you look hard enough you might find a therapist willing to work with you on a sliding scale basis, preferably find one with a radical/feminist analysis) or someone outside the scene/community altogether (who you know for sure has not been a victim of abuse). If you honestly believe you are being falsely accused your character will have to speak for yourself rather than you speaking for your character.

8. Don't Hide Behind Your Friends

Often the people most vocal in defending abusers are not the abusers them- selves, but their friends, comrades, and lovers. "But s/he's really a good person/ activist/artist" or "S/he contributed so much to the community/scene" or "The person I know would never do something like that" are some common defensive reactions among many. If you feel that people are trying to insulate you from your problems or from questioning your actions, let them know that it isn't ac-

SUGGESTIONS TO PEOPLE CALLED OUT FOR ABUSIVE BEHAVIOR

1. Be Honest, Stay Honest, Get Honest

If you know that you hurt the person calling you out for abuse, acknowledge it. If you think it's a possibility that you might have hurt them, let them know. If you have any inkling that some way that you interacted with them might have compromised their dignity and boundaries, let them know. The first step to dealing with our abusive tendencies is getting out of denial. Denial is like an infection. It starts in some locality (specific instances and situations, nitpicking at certain parts of an account of the situation[s]), and if untreated, festers and eventually consumes us entirely. When we are able to vocalize that we are aware that something isn't quite right with our behavior, it brings us a step closer to dealing with it in a meaningful and honest way.

2. Respect Survivor Autonomy

Survivor autonomy means that the survivor of abuse, and the survivor of abuse alone calls the shots concerning how abusive behavior is dealt with. This means s/he calls the shots and you live with her/his decisions. You don't get to de- termine how or even if a mediation/confrontation happens, or initiate action towards a resolution. You get to make it explicitly clear that you respect their autonomy in the situation, and that you're willing to work towards a resolution. They may prefer to never be in the same space with you again and don't wish to speak with you. It is not their responsibility, nor their duty, to attempt for resolu- tion or enter into dialogue with you or take any specific course of action for that matter. However, it is your responsibility, as someone being called out, to respect their needs and desires.

3. Learn To Listen

It is imperative that you open your ears and your heart to the person calling you out. This will likely be difficult, because people tend to get defensive and closed when they are accused of wrongdoing. Very few people in this world want to be pegged as the “bad apple of the “bunch” To listen you will need to keep your defensive and knee jerk reactionary tendencies in check. These suggestions could be very helpful to you: A) Let the person calling you out direct the dialogue. If they want you to answer questions do so, but otherwise let them have the floor. B) Be aware when you’re formulating responses and counterpoints in your head while they’re expressing their account of the situation(s), and attempt to stop doing so. C) Focus on their account of things, and save going over in your head how you remember things until after they have spoken. D) Reflect upon the entirety of what they expressed and not just the disparities between your and their account of events. E) Talk with your friends about how you can better listen before you enter a mediation/confrontation.

4. Practice Patience

Sometimes things take time to be resolved. Sometimes it takes months, years, decades for a resolution, and sometimes there is no clear-cut resolution. However, there is no timeline for resolution when human dignity is at stake. Be patient and never attempt to force a resolution, a process, or a dialogue. You may ask for a dialogue or a mediation, but if the answer is no it is no until s/he says it is yes. Don’t attempt to wear down the boundaries of the person calling you out by asking for dialogue or mediation over and over again. Stay put, reflect, and think about the power dynamics in your relations with others.

5. Never, *Ever*, Blame The Victim

S/he did not ask for violence or abuse. S/he did not ask for it in how s/he dressed. S/he didn’t ask for it, because s/he was under the influence of alcohol or drugs. S/he didn’t ask for it, because s/he is a sex worker. S/he didn’t ask for it because she chose to make out with you or because s/he went back to your place or because s/he is known to be into s/m or because she is a “tease” or because she is a “slut”. S/he did not ask for it in anyway. It is not acceptable to write off his/her responses to your behavior, because she is “hypersensitive” to ‘your’ threatening of abusive behavior. It is not acceptable to say that s/he is “exaggerating” the abuse, because s/he is a feminist/queer liberationist/activist/punk/youth/”a PC thug”/etc. It is not acceptable to say that s/he is making it up, because s/he has a history of abuse or any other such nonsense. Making excuses for why someone is to blame for your hurtful actions are a way for you

to avoid taking responsibility for ‘your’ fucked up behavior. They expose you as a coward.

6. Speak For Yourself

You can account for your experience and your experience and your experience alone. Don’t ever assume that you can know how the person calling you out as an abuser experienced the situation(s). People walk down the same streets every day and have very different experiences. This is a simple fact of life. It is, also, a very different experience to have the winds of privilege blowing against your back than to have the winds of oppression blowing in your face as you walk down those same streets. You cannot know how someone else felt at a certain moment, and so you should never presume that you have the right to judge the validity of their feelings. If they have expressed how they feel, then what you need to do, first and foremost, is to listen. It is important that you actively seek to understand theirs feelings. If you find that you simply cannot understand their feelings no matter how sincerely you try it is still not your place to judge the validity of them.

7. Don’t Engage In Silence Behavior

By telling your “side of the story” you could be creating an atmosphere that silences people who have been abused. If you feel that there are major discrepancies between your account of the situation(s) and their account, and that you are being “falsely accused,” take a deep breath. First you need to know that you can never stop sincerely investigating the yourself and questioning how your behavior affects others: the case is never closed. With time you might come to realize that, yes, in fact your behavior was abusive. It is your responsibility to continuously challenge your notions about how your behaviors affect others, and to challenge your understandings of how you hold power over others in your relationships. Read books, enter into recovery programs for batterer/sexual assaultants, seek out a therapist, and discover your own ways of challenging yourself and your conceptions of how your behavior effects others.

Understand that if you attempt to silence the person(s) by promoting your account of things as “the truth” you will silence others as well. People will fear coming forward with their stories and fear confronting abuse, because of YOUR silencing behavior. If you are committed to creating a world where people speak freely about the wrongs done to them you will want to avoid focusing on how the accusers are “lying” about you, and you will want to avoid airing your presumptions and theories as to their “motives”. One example off the top of my head is how one particular rapist/sexual assailant passed out a list of 40 points of contention at a punk show to refute the stories of three women calling him out.