

# Privilege and Mistakes

## What do we mean when we talk about privileged groups?

Privilege is active on a personal, social, cultural and institutional level. It operates in a way that benefits people from some social identity groups over others. For example, able bodied people, white people and males benefit from privilege because their life and opportunities haven't been negatively impacted due to the social identity group they belong to. Whereas people with disabilities, people from ethnic minorities and females, trans or non-binary people are more likely to find that their life is made harder because of the discrimination they face due to the social identity group they belong to.

This concept does not mean that people who are not from protected groups have had an easy life or that they haven't earned their accomplishments. It means that for some, life isn't made harder because of a protected characteristic. It highlights the fact that people from protected groups have poorer access to resources, services and power and are likely to have experienced systematic barriers, including discrimination which severely impacts their life experiences and choices.

## If we make a mistake or cause harm how can we resolve this?

The following 'boots and sandals' example was created by Presley Pizzo as a simple analogy to help highlight the power imbalances that can occur between privileged groups and marginalised groups. It uses a simple footwear scenario to demonstrate how people from privileged groups can make mistakes that harm those from marginalised groups. The way these mistakes are responded to can perpetuate the harm further. However, with consideration and a commitment to resolve their mistake the privileged person can use the incident as an opportunity to learn and to become an ally.

**Boots and Sandals** (created by Presley Pizzo: extract taken from Amelie Lamont's open Guide to allyship [guidetoallyship.com](http://guidetoallyship.com))

Imagine your privilege is a heavy boot that keeps you from feeling when you're stepping on someone's feet or they're stepping on yours, while



oppressed people have only sandals. If someone says, “Ouch! You’re stepping on my toes,” how do you react?

Because we can think more clearly about stepping on someone’s literal toes than we usually do when it comes to oppression, the problems with many common responses are obvious:

- **Focusing on yourself:** “I can’t believe you think I’m a toe-stepper! I’m a good person!”
- **Denial that others’ experiences are different from your own:** “I don’t mind when people step on my toes.”
- **Derailing:** “Some people don’t even have toes, why aren’t we talking about them instead?”
- **Refusal to focus on the impacted:** “All toes matter!”
- **Tone policing:** “I’d move my foot if you’d ask me more nicely.”
- **Denial that the problem is fixable:** “Toes getting stepped on is a fact of life. You’ll be better off when you accept that.”
- **Victim blaming:** “You shouldn’t have been walking around people with boots!”
- **Withdrawing:** “I thought you wanted my help, but I guess not. I’ll just go home.”

In reality, most of us naturally know the right way to react when we step on someone’s toes, and we can use that to help us learn how to react when we commit microaggressions.

- **Focus on the impacted:** “Are you okay?”
- **Listen to their response and learn.**
- **Apologize for the impact, even though you didn’t intend it:** “I’m sorry!”
- **Stop the instance:** move your foot
- **Stop the pattern:** be careful where you step in the future. When it comes to oppression, we want to actually change the “footwear” to get rid of privilege and oppression (sneakers for all!), but metaphors can only stretch so far!