

# Counterspeech DOs and DON'Ts

A tool for countering online hate and harassment - without making things worse

## Note to counterspeakers:

Every situation is different, and counterspeech doesn't always work. Sometimes people are determined to hurt, are convinced they're right, or both.

If you choose to engage, here are some tips for getting positive results.

At those times it might be best to disengage or use other tactics,\* so use your best judgment.



## Before You Start

**Protect yourself** – take steps to protect yourself from retaliation (see the resources at [iheartmob.org/tech](http://iheartmob.org/tech)).



Think about how your online identity or profiles could be used against you.



**Think about** what you want to accomplish. Do you want to change the person's mind, or how they post or tweet? Stop them from attacking someone else? Change other people's minds or behavior?

**Remind yourself** that behind each comment – no matter how hateful – is a human being. Treat them as you would want to be treated.

## Counterspeech DOs : Things you can try when you feel safe



**Stay calm.** If you're upset, wait a bit before responding.  
**Ask questions,** like "Why do you think that?" or "What do you mean?"  
**Refer to potential outcomes,** like "That could hurt someone."



**Try humor.** If your intent is kind and you're not mocking the person, humor can soften the exchange and attract others to show their support. Counter with images that are silly, clever, or funny – not hurtful – to de-escalate.

**Label the comment, not the person,** like "That word comes from a racist stereotype."  
**Show empathy and connection with the target** ("I'm Asian American too, and..." or with the speaker ("I'm angry about this too, but...").  
**Start a supportive hashtag** like #LoveForLeslieJones.



## Counterspeech DON'Ts

**Don't** label people – for example, calling them a bigot.  
**Don't** assume the person has bad intentions.  
**Don't** be hostile, insulting, or aggressive – it can escalate the conflict.  
**Don't** talk down to the person – it can shut down communication.  
**Don't** nitpick or correct spelling or grammar. Use a civil tone and link to a source if you want to correct false information.  
**Don't** silence the person with threats, social exclusion, or other punishment.



Adapted from "Considerations for Successful Counterspeech" by Susan Benesch, Derek Ruffo, Kelly P Dillon, Hajj Mohammad Saleem, and Lucas Wright (The Dangerous Speech Project, October 2016) and Megan Phelps-Roper's TED talk of February, 2017. Edited by Anne Collier of [iCanHelpLine.org](http://iCanHelpLine.org), in cooperation with the Dangerous Speech Project, iHeartMob, #iCANHELP and Project HEAR. Design by Kendall Simpson. Special thanks to student adviser Chet Ellis in Conn, and #iCANHELP's student focus group in California.

Find our full resource at [CounterspeechTips.org](http://CounterspeechTips.org).  
For more tips on countering on- and offline harassment, visit [ihollaback.org/resources/bystander\\_resources](http://ihollaback.org/resources/bystander_resources).