

Ouch, Whoa, Oops: How to Acknowledge and Respond to Harm in the Moment

In 2019, NPYM minuted our commitment to uprooting racism. As part of that ever-evolving process, we are using the “Ouch, Whoa, Oops” tool throughout Annual Session.

“Ouch, Whoa, Oops” is one model for acknowledging and interrupting harm. It is particularly useful in the context of systemic oppression, where large-scale social forces and patterns have set us up to participate in behaviors that reinforce oppression, even when we may not be aware of it. The basics:

- **“Ouch”** is for when you want to publicly acknowledge that you have been harmed. Remember that feeling uncomfortable is different than being harmed.
- **“Whoa”** is for when you witness something that reinforces some type of systemic oppression or dehumanization, and you want to draw everyone’s attention to it.
- **“Oops”** is for acknowledging when you have done something that caused harm or reinforced systemic oppression. It acknowledges that you may have caused harm, and that it was a mistake or you didn’t mean to.

These are optional tools for Friends to use in the service of our collective commitment to dismantling racism. These words should be used “as led,” not as obligations.

Part of the ouch-whoa-oops philosophy is that in a group setting, when harm happens or a form of systemic oppression is supported, it is important for the whole group to acknowledge that there was an impact – even if not everyone present fully understands what happened. Harm affects everyone present, and our response to harm in the moment can normalize it or challenge it within each of us. Private, in-depth conversations with individuals may be necessary for healing as well, but public recognition of public harm is important to decrease the chance of normalizing the harm.

When someone says “ouch” or “whoa,” our first task is to pause. Take a breath. Seek guidance for all of us, individually and as a collective. Wait for way to open before moving forward after one of these sacred interruptions. Discomfort in response to an expression of pain is common; be cautious that you are not moving to suppress the *expression* of pain and failing to address the *source* of pain.

If you say or do something that inspires an “ouch” or a “whoa,” the goal is to *respond* rather than *react*. Take some worshipful breaths to (re)connect with that of God in yourself and in the person who spoke up. Notice if your nervous system is in fight-or-flight mode. If you need to step away for a moment to ground yourself, please take that time. A query to consider: **What is the caring response to this expression of pain?**

This is something that we are all working on together. Please look for the virtual or in-person “O-W-O Debriefing Table” at mealtimes if you have questions.