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There are no safe spaces

By [Jos](#) | Published: August 12, 2009

Since I started writing in the Feministing Community I have seen the idea of a *safe space* come up when comment threads take offensive turns. I find the notion of creating a safe space on a highly trafficked website dubious. Hate speech should never be tolerated but, though we can edit comments and ban users, it cannot be completely prevented. I think there is a bigger problem with the idea of safe spaces that goes beyond the internet, though. I have come to believe that creating safe spaces is an unrealistic goal and that labeling a space as safe is highly problematic.

The goal of creating a space free of violence, including verbal violence, is a lofty one. But we all have our own personal histories and it is impossible to know what might trigger any one person. I am consistently surprised by what words and actions trigger me the most and gain new insight into my own experience of trauma as a result. How can I expect anyone else to anticipate all my triggers?

Members of marginalized groups all have our own triggers. There are certainly shared histories that give us insight into what might negatively impact the psyche of members of a group as a whole. This is where we get an understanding of hate speech from. But identity is nuanced and complex, and each person's feelings and experiences are their own. A space that includes members of multiple groups can easily give rise to triggering moments from well meaning people who do not understand member's of another group's identity based trauma. But even closed identity based spaces can feel incredibly unsafe and be home to deeply hurtful words and actions because of intersecting identities and individual experiences not accounted for by broad social categories. Identity based spaces are important, but we need to recognize we cannot promise safety even in these spaces.

The most comfortable, intimate space can turn violent with shocking speed. This experience can make someone incredibly distrusting of claims of safety. It is these feelings that should be centered when choosing how to frame social justice spaces. It is inappropriate to claim a space will be safe as it's something that can simply never be guaranteed. And, for spaces based around learning, I'm not sure safety is even the best goal. We should certainly work to prevent attacks and avoid triggering others, but the process of learning about identity and privilege is not a safe one. It requires a willingness to step outside one's own comfort zone, to be challenged, to change the way we see the world. For all these reasons myself and others in the social justice community believe it's time to move on to a new way of understanding the spaces we create.

When framing social justice spaces, especially those centered around learning, I have come more and more to embrace the idea of *accountable space*. Accountability means being responsible to oneself and each other for our own words. It means entering a space with good intentions but understanding that we all screw up and need to accept responsibility for our mistakes. It means being OK with and open to being called out. It means acknowledging when others are triggered and when we feel pain and working to learn and grow from this experience. And it requires something incredibly difficult, a trust in those we share a space with that their intentions are good, that they mean well just like we do, that we are all in a process of learning and growing and that making mistakes is part of how this happens.

Accountable space is still incredibly difficult to create online, where people who disagree with us intensely and mean us ill can enter spaces with a degree of anonymity that does not exist in face to face interactions. But it is something those of us who are here with good intentions can strive for individually and collectively.