

# Master Suppression Techniques and Counter Strategies



Master suppression techniques can be used as an analytical tool to understand and analyze situations where unequal power positions affect social relations, resulting in discrimination and oppression. The related counter strategies function as a responsive tool for the suppression techniques while validation techniques are concrete preventive or behavioral tools to change social climates.

In short: Master suppression techniques are strategies of social manipulation used, unconsciously or consciously, to maintain power and suppress people in social relations. Power exists in every social relation, not only between e.g. parent and child, police and criminal, boss and employee or teacher and student, but also between friends, colleagues or family members. In every social relation, a negotiation of power will take place. The suppression techniques are connected to structural discrimination and inequality in society. They can be used by anyone, but are most - and most effectively - used by people with more power against people with less power.

The framework of master suppression techniques can be considered a norm critical approach that has the purpose of raising awareness of how the norm and majority in societies affect our way of understanding different minority positions. It can be used as tool for awareness rising of privileged groups, (i.e. a white awareness perspective), or as an awareness and empowerment tool. Find more background material in Resources.

# The First Five Master Suppression Techniques

Invisibilizing; conveys that the target do not exist, and that his/her presence and actions are of no value or importance by ignoring people, interrupting, forgetting what they say, or neglecting themes or groups. Whether intentional or unintentional, the target may feel insignificant and insecure.

**Counter strategy:** Taking up space, insist on transparency and point out when people dominate.

**Ridiculing;** conveys a lack of equality, by belittling, taunting or making fun of people. A person ridiculing another reduces the target to a figure of fun, because of e.g. appearance, traits, origin or affiliations to religion or culture.

Being the target of this ruler technique, one may find it difficult to feel taken seriously.

**Counter strategy:** Questioning and speaking up. Don't go with the joke, point out if the tone is unacceptable.

Withholding information; not sharing information on purpose or by mistake, forgetting to invite all colleagues or relevant persons. When not having access to relevant information of e.g. written communication, news, invitations or minutes of a meeting, it may lead to incorrect or delayed response from the person who is excluded from the information.

Counter strategy: 'Cards on the table' - Demand transparency and maybe more time, ask questions and only agree on important decisions if you are well- informed.

Damned if you do, damned if you don't; whatever choice a person makes, it is wrong. For instance if you are outspoken, you're too dominating while if a good listener, you're weak. If focusing on career, you're neglecting your children while you lack ambition, if you prioritize your children (Stockholm University, 2004: 11).

Counter strategy: Altering/breaking free of the pattern by demanding the right to say no and decide on your own priorities and choices.

Heaping blame and putting to shame; making a person feel ashamed and guilty for an action, a trait, a certain development or a situation, even though this person is not to blame. For example, when women are made to feel guilty for being sexually harassed as they are told their clothes or behaviors are the cause of the harassment.

Counter strategy: Intellectualization - Only take responsibility for what you reasonably are responsible for, analyze the situation and do not take blame for something you cannot change.

*This section is inspired by an article by professors at Stockholm University (2004) who worked out counter strategies and validation techniques with outset in feminist Berit Aas definitions of master suppression techniques. For more on each of the suppression techniques, counter strategies and validation techniques see Resources.*

## How To Present The Master Suppression Techniques and Counter Strategies:

1. The first step is to create awareness of the master suppression techniques by giving concrete examples of situations where these occur, often unintentionally and in hidden power structures between people.
2. The second step is to give the tool to react and call attention to the uncomfortable situation, by using the counter strategies. These provide concrete examples on how to respond, while staying calm and keeping yourself respected. The counter strategies may put much pressure on the oppressed, but is often needed as the oppressor are not necessarily aware of the consequences of their actions and behavior. Note here that counter strategies are also, if not more, a responsibility of observers and people present when the suppression technique is acted out.
3. The third step (validation techniques) illustrates how to take responsibility by your own example, and thereby creating a social climate in which the oppressive techniques are not used. The idea with the alternative reaction strategies is thereby to promote genuine and sustainable change in social climates.

## Suggestions for Use

The master-suppression techniques have mostly been used in white awareness trainings or in awareness and empowerment trainings on discrimination issues - based on ethnicity, culture, religion, gender or sexual orientation.

Following are three examples for inspiration:

## **A Feminism/Gender Position Training**

Use the tools to analyze and deal with gender positions and feminism. For instance to discuss situations where female colleagues are belittled (e.g. called honey or sweetie), ignored or excluded from important work related information, as a result of an (often) unconscious assumption that a woman is less capable as a leader or colleague in certain positions. It could also focus on how women and men correct each other and themselves to fit into the norms of how “real women” or “real men” are supposed to act and behave.

## **An Anti-Racism Training (also concerning culture, religion, ethnicity, nationality)**

Use the tools to analyze and deal with racial, ethnic or cultural positions. For instance discuss situations where white people attribute specific traits to a person of color or a person with a minority ethnic/national background, or assuming, that a Muslim colleague/person acts or thinks in certain stereotypical ways.

## **A Conflict Management Training**

Use the tools for conflict management. Understand individuals or group's sense of feeling suppressed or discriminated and use the tools to analyze concrete situations and develop alternative strategies for reaction. Also use the tools to analyze situations where conflict has escalated or in order to prevent future conflict, and to clarify how hidden power structures in society and between individuals affect our way of acting and interacting with each other. It is especially relevant if working with people from diverse backgrounds, or where majority/minority issues cause discomfort or conflict.

# Challenges

- Be aware that working with master suppression techniques, and topics like racism or feminism, may provoke opposition, denial, discussion, uncomfortable situations and critical questions. This aspect calls for the facilitator to familiarize themselves with background and definitions on related themes such as racism, structural racism and structural discrimination. On the right are links to short introductions to relevant concepts and further background literature. It is not necessary to present all these concepts, rather it is important to be well prepared to be able to raise awareness and discuss on a constructive and informative level. It is always useful to be prepared with realistic examples on specific situations where the master suppression techniques happen.
- When working with the tools consider your context and target group. As it is sometimes relevant to apply in situations where tension is already a fact, consider the composition of your target group, and make sure to avoid blaming, shaming and pointing fingers at those who on a structural level may be positioned better or worse. Point to the structures of society, and not to the individuals.