

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

What Is Code Switching?

You might have heard about “code switching”—but what is it really?

Code switching occurs when a speaker switches cultural “codes” while expressing themselves, depending on the audience they’re addressing. This can include languages, speech, mannerisms, and behaviours.

People can code switch for a variety of reasons, including trying to assimilate/fit in, achieve power/respect, or to avoid confrontation. This process is usually automatic—most of us don’t even realize we’re doing it. Code switching can look like:

- A bilingual person switching between English and French to better express their point.
- Students addressing a professor in a more serious tone than they would fellow students; or in a workplace, workers addressing their boss in a more formal tone than co-workers.
- A teenager having exciting news to tell might text their parents “I have exciting news!”, but text their best friend a series of exclamation points and emojis.
- Politicians emphasizing or downplaying an accent based on the audience they’re addressing

It’s important to note that in recent years, new definitions of code switching have shone a light on the ways it’s required by those who don’t feel they belong, in order to be accepted as someone who falls outside the negative biases being thrust upon them. This is especially accurate for those in BIPOC communities, where racial bias is present, and people of colour want to be seen as less threatening, putting others at ease. For example:

- Changing natural hairstyles in order to appear “professional” (where the standard of “professional” has been set by the appearance of a mostly-white workplace)
- Those who speak English as a second language trying to eliminate or tone down their accent
- Refraining from using African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the workplace or classroom for fear of being seen as unprofessional or not as intelligent.

There are cases when code-switching isn’t considered optional for BIPOC. Code switching is essential for talking to police officers for those who are Black—as we’ve seen through increased attention to the murders of Black men and women by police throughout the Black Lives Matter movement. Those who are Black don’t have the freedom to behave disrespectfully to police, even when they’re being treated with disrespect (although that’s not to say that code switching is enough to avoid police brutality altogether).

Code switching can be seen as a double-edged sword—on the one hand, switching codes in order to be seen as less threatening and more belonging can lead Black people to feel more accepted in the workplace. But the reason that they’re being accepted is problematic—being asked to assimilate by changing aspects of one’s personality has real-world consequences. The **Harvard Business Review** reports that constant code-switching can take a psychological toll, depleting cognitive resources and hindering performance.

A good way to negate the need for code switching is to practise inclusiveness—ensure that the people around you feel comfortable. Be as genuine as you can, in order to show that it’s safe for those around you to be themselves, too. If you find yourself wondering if someone is code-switching with you, take
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that time to reflect and explore your own biases—why would I think this person isn't being genuine? Do I have an idea of what it's like to be part of a culture, that I might be projecting onto someone?

Lastly, remember that another person's code-switching isn't about you—it's about how people decide to show up in the world, often in an attempt to keep themselves safe.