



Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion
Centre canadien pour la diversité et l'inclusion

www.ccdi.ca

Commemoration guide: Halloween

Halloween, celebrated on October 31, has rich cultural and religious origins. Its roots trace back to the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain (/ˈsɑːwɪn/ or /ˈsəʊ.ɪn/. It is pronounced like "SAH-win" or "SOW-in."), a time when people believed the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead became blurred, allowing spirits to roam the earth. It also shares important ties with various other celebrations from several faiths and cultures, including Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), All Saints Day, and All Souls Day.

Today, Halloween in Canada and the USA is characterized by a blend of old and new traditions. It is widely celebrated with activities such as trick-or-treating, where children dress in costumes and go door-to-door collecting candy. People also decorate their homes with creepy themes, carve jack-o'-lanterns from pumpkins, and attend costume parties. Haunted attractions, horror movie marathons, and festive gatherings are also common, making Halloween a season of both frightful fun and communal festivity. Even through its commercialized modern form, Halloween continues to echo its historical origins through the themes of the supernatural and the celebration of autumnal harvests.

Learn more about Halloween from [the Canadian Encyclopedia](#).

Halloween celebrations in the workplace can foster a festive atmosphere but also bring challenges like cultural appropriation and triggering scare factors for those with PTSD or anxiety. Our guide for CCDI Employer Partners offers tips to navigate these issues sensitively, emphasizing education on cultural respect and providing clear opt-out options for those uncomfortable with festivities due to personal, religious, or cultural reasons. It's important to acknowledge and accommodate diverse perspectives, ensuring everyone feels respected whether they choose to participate in Halloween activities or not.

Note: A magnifying glass icon (🔍) indicates that a resource is available in the CCDI Knowledge Repository.

Some dos and don'ts for a positive celebration

Workplace celebrations like Halloween offer more than just a day of fun. They can also play a role in fostering team spirit, building relationships, and celebrating diversity among employees.

1. **Fostering team spirit:** Celebrations can provide an opportunity for employees to come together in a fun and relaxed atmosphere, fostering camaraderie and team spirit
2. **Building relationships:** Informal gatherings provide opportunities for networking and building relationships across different departments or teams.
3. **Celebrating diversity:** Workplace celebrations provide a platform for employees to showcase their individuality and cultural richness, fostering an inclusive environment where diversity is celebrated and appreciated.

However, some challenges can arise around Halloween, like religious conflicts and cultural appropriation, and there are some things that you might want to keep in mind to keep your celebrations positive. Below are some dos and don'ts to help things run smoothly.

Do:

- **Set clear intentions:** Think about your workplace culture when setting the tone for the event. Consider statements that make the tone of the event clear and set clear expectations, like these suggestions from [SHRM](#):
 - “In our workplace, Halloween is intended as a secular celebration.”
 - “We recognize that not everyone celebrates Halloween. You should not feel compelled to participate.”
 - “Please do not wear anything that is inconsistent with our equal employment opportunity or diversity policy.”
- **Give advance notice:** Provide clear information in advance about the planned Halloween celebrations, including dates, times, and types of activities planned.
- **Provide guidance for costumes and decorations:** Clearly communicate guidelines for costumes and decorations to ensure they are respectful and inclusive. Include examples of inappropriate attire or themes (e.g., stereotypes, offensive symbols) to guide employees. It's important to reiterate that themes involving horror, gore, or violence can be triggering to individuals with lived experience or vicarious trauma related to conflict or other traumatic events. We provide some reflection questions below that can be shared with employees.
- **Remind employees of relevant policies:** Asking employees to review relevant policies ahead of time, like harassment and discrimination policies or dress codes, can support proactive efforts toward respectful celebrations.

- **Consider dietary needs:** If your workplace provides food during holiday celebrations, ensure a diverse menu that accommodates different dietary preferences and restrictions, including vegetarian, halal, kosher, and more. Collect input from employees to ensure everyone's needs are met.

Don't:

- **Make it mandatory:** Some people may be uncomfortable participating in Halloween activities, or unable to because of religious or cultural beliefs. Ensure that alternatives exist and there is no pressure to participate. Consider offering scheduling flexibility for time off or remote work on the day, if possible.
- **Forget to ask for feedback:** Create opportunities for employees to provide input, ask questions, or express concerns about the planned celebrations. This could be through open forums, anonymous feedback boxes, or HR representatives.

The following resources provide additional guidance for positive celebrations:

- [Celebrating Halloween in the Workplace](#)
- [Halloween in the Workplace: 10 Do's and Don'ts](#)
- [Opinion: Dos and don'ts of celebrating Halloween at the office](#)
- [Setting Guidelines for Celebrating Halloween in the Workplace](#)
- [Workplace Halloween Celebrations Can Lead to Scary Situations](#)

Cultural appropriation and navigating costumes

Common challenges posed by Halloween are offensive costumes and cultural appropriation.

Offensive costumes might...

- **Reinforce stereotypes:** Costumes that depict exaggerated or simplified characteristics of a particular group can reinforce harmful stereotypes. For example, dressing as a "drunk Irishman" perpetuates stereotypes about Irish people.
- **Mock or belittle:** Costumes that mock or belittle a culture, religion, or identity are offensive. This includes costumes that turn serious cultural symbols or attire into jokes, such as dressing as a "sexy nun" or "mental patient".
- **Include insensitive historical references:** Costumes that reference traumatic historical events or figures, like dressing as a Nazi or a slave, trivialize real atrocities and are deeply offensive.

- **Reference racial caricatures:** Blackface, yellowface, and brownface involve using makeup or accessories to change your skin colour or facial features to look more like a certain race and are blatant forms of racism that should never be done. These resources provide more information about this form of racism:
 - [Blackface](#)
 - [Brownface. Blackface. They're all offensive. And here's why](#)
 - [The Historical Harm of Blackface](#)

Cultural appropriation, as defined in CCDI's [Glossary of IDEA Terms](#), is “the theft of cultural elements or objects from equity-seeking groups for use, commodification, or profit without understanding the cultural significance and historical context.”

Cultural appropriation on Halloween might involve...

- **Using sacred or cultural symbols:** Wearing items that have deep cultural, religious, or spiritual significance, such as headdresses, bindis, or hijabs, are considered cultural appropriation when worn as a costume. These items are not just fashion accessories but hold significant meaning and importance in their respective cultures.
- **Commodification of culture:** Turning cultural attire or symbols into a costume for entertainment purposes can be seen as reducing an entire culture to a novelty. For example, wearing a kimono or sari as part of a costume.
- **Reinforcement of power dynamics:** When members of a dominant culture appropriate elements of an equity-deserving group, it can reinforce power imbalances and historical oppression. This is particularly true when the dominant group has a history of oppressing the culture being appropriated.
- **Inaccurate representations:** Wearing costumes that inaccurately or poorly replicate cultural attire can perpetuate misinformation and misunderstandings about that culture. This includes “gypsy” costumes, which misrepresent and stigmatize the Romani people.

Below are some questions to consider when choosing a Halloween costume. These can be shared with employees ahead of any Halloween celebrations to encourage self-reflection.

Cultural significance	- Does this costume represent a race, culture, or religion that is not my own? - Am I aware of the historical and cultural significance of the elements of this costume?
Stereotyping	- Does this costume rely on stereotypes or caricatures of a particular group? - Would wearing this costume reinforce stereotypes?
Respect	- Would people from the group I am portraying find this costume respectful? - Is this costume mocking, belittling, or trivializing someone's race, culture, religion, or identity?
Intent and impact	- What is my intention in wearing this costume? Is it purely for fun or to make a statement? - Regardless of my intent, how might others perceive this costume? Could it be seen as offensive or disrespectful?
Consultation	- Have I sought input from individuals who belong to the culture or group I am considering portraying? - Are there voices from that community that I can listen to or learn from regarding this costume choice?
Historical context	- What is the historical context of my costume? - Does this costume have a history of being used in a derogatory or hurtful manner? - Are there specific cultural or historical events associated with this costume that should be considered?
Personal reflection	- How would I feel if someone wore a costume that caricatured my own culture or identity? - Am I open to reconsidering my choice if I learn that it could be offensive or harmful to others?

These resources provide further information about cultural appropriation and selecting respectful Halloween costumes:

- 🕒 [#IAmNotACostume](#)
- 🕒 [Appropriate Costumes vs. Cultural Appropriation: A Halloween Guide for Employers](#)
- 🕒 [Costume with care](#)
- 🕒 [Cultural Appropriation Tipsheet](#)
- 🕒 [Dreading Halloween: Creating a Dialogue about Cultural Appropriation](#)
- 🕒 [How To Avoid Wearing A Racist Halloween Costume](#)
- 🕒 [My Culture is Not A Costume: Cultural Appropriation vs Cultural Appreciation](#)
- 🕒 [Practice Inclusion This Halloween](#)
- 🕒 [CCDI Webinar: Understanding power and privilege: An intersectional lens](#)
- 🕒 [Why Cultural Appropriation is Disrespectful](#)

Having the conversation

How do I approach a colleague who comes to work in an offensive costume? How can we have productive conversations about cultural appropriation? Here are a couple of established frameworks that can help you structure your discussions:

Nonviolent Communication (Rosenberg)

- 🕒 **Observation:** State what you observe without judgment.
- 🕒 **Feelings:** Express your feelings related to what you observe.
- 🕒 **Needs:** Identify the needs connected to your feelings.
- 🕒 **Requests:** Make specific, actionable requests.
 - 🔍 [Depolarizing the workplace: Practical tools for compassionate communication](#)

The BRAVE Framework (Rugg and Avery)

- 🕒 **Build:** Build the intention, focus, and safety needed to have honest conversations.
- 🕒 **Respect:** Respect the sensitivity of the topic while challenging people to go beyond the superficial. Employees need to respect other people's boundaries.
- 🕒 **Acknowledge:** Acknowledge the uncomfortable realities of the past and the present.
- 🕒 **Validate:** Validate and accept the experiences of your racialized colleagues. Productive conversation requires acknowledging the reality of racism and racial discrimination.
- 🕒 **Emphasize:** Emphasize how your organization is prioritizing goals and metrics around racial equity. Conversations should lead somewhere.
 - 🔍 [Guide to courageous conversations on racism and discrimination](#)
 - 🔍 [How to Have BRAVE Conversations About Race in the Workplace – Dr. Enrica Ruggs & Dr. Derek Avery \(podcast episode\)](#)
 - 🔍 [BRAVE Conversations About Race \(recorded webinar\)](#)

These resources provide further information about having difficult conversations:

- 🔍 [Calling In and Calling Out Guide](#)
- 🔍 [Guidelines for Discussing Incidents of Hate, Bias, and Discrimination](#)
- [How To Have The Cultural Appropriation Conversation This Halloween](#)
- [How to Address \(and Prevent\) Cultural Appropriation at Work](#)
- 🔍 [CCDI Webinar: Microaggressions: Microinterventions and microaffirmations](#)
- 🔍 [CCDI Webinar: Safe spaces and effective conflict resolution](#)
- 🔍 [CCDI Webinar: Safe spaces for dialogue: Encouraging authenticity in the workplace](#)

Handling concerns and complaints

Organizations can also ensure that all employees feel respected, that complaints are taken seriously, and that feedback is received openly by establishing clear protocols and responsive measures. Here are some strategies to handle concerns and complaints professionally and proactively:

1. **Designated contact:** Appoint a specific person or team as a point of contact for handling concerns. This individual or team should be easily identifiable and accessible to participants throughout the event. Ensure their contact information is clearly communicated in event materials and signage.
2. **Prompt response:** Respond promptly and professionally to complaints, listening actively and documenting details. Acknowledge receipt of the complaint swiftly and reassure the complainant that their concerns are being taken seriously. Active listening is crucial—allow the complainant to express their concerns fully without interruption. Document all details of the complaint, including time, date, parties involved, and specifics of the issue.
3. **Thorough investigation:** Conduct a thorough investigation to understand the issue. Gather facts objectively by interviewing witnesses and examining the event's policies and procedures relevant to the issue. Ensure impartiality throughout the investigation process.
4. **Effective actions:** Take appropriate action based on investigation findings, consulting as needed. Actions may include:
 - **Policy enforcement:** Ensure that event policies and rules are enforced consistently and fairly.
 - **Training or education:** Provide additional training to those involved to prevent similar issues in the future.
 - **Policy review or revision:** Evaluate if event policies need revision based on the incident and update them accordingly.
 - **Consultation:** Consult with event organizers, legal advisors, or relevant parties to determine the most suitable actions, especially for complex or sensitive issues.

These resources provide further information about handling concerns and complaints:

- 🔍 [A policy primer: Guide to developing human rights policies and procedures](#)
- [Discrimination prevention and inclusion](#)
- 🔍 [Guidelines for responding to complaints of harassment and discrimination](#)
- 🔍 [HRPA Practice Guideline: Addressing Racism and Racial Discrimination in the Workplace](#)
- [HR Halloween: How to handle an office party nightmare](#)
- 🔍 [Managing conflict in the modern workplace](#)
- 🔍 [United to Respect: Promoting dignity and respect in the workplace](#)