

For White Allies: Challenging Everyday Racism

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We've all had those conversations in which casual racism rears its ugly head. You're out with friends or in a meeting at work, and suddenly someone says something horrifying. Frequently, "I'm not racist, but..." shows up more than once. Speaking up seems difficult at first, but you can get better at it with practice. These tips and answers to common racist assertions can help!

Some basic tips:

Speak for yourself.

Don't present yourself as the spokesperson for all people of color. You're not, and you don't have to be. Talk about why anti-racist activism is important to you. Do you have a friend, family member, or loved one who has been hurt by racism? Did you read a book, take a class, or see a film that motivated you? Share that! Where you are coming from is just fine. This also helps you deflect the "But I have a friend who's a person of color who thinks this is okay!" argument. You can end with something as simple as, "That makes me really uncomfortable, and I would prefer it if you didn't speak like that around me."

Challenge the behavior, not the person.

If you call a person a racist, you're in a fight you can't win. You don't know what's in their head. But a behavior is a concrete thing you can address in a single conversation. Also, this tactic helps defuse defensiveness because you make calling them out about addressing a particular statement, not attacking them personally. You can always say something like, "I thought this was unlike you," or "I was really shocked because you're usually not like that. Can we talk about this thing you said?"

Keep your cool.

Is your goal to be right or to create change? Steamrolling someone's argument into the ground is satisfying, but it doesn't create alliances, it makes people angry. Assume goodwill and be as polite as you can stand to be. Also, education is a privilege, and you may simply have had more of it than the person you're calling out. Most schools don't actually teach the truth about the oppression of people of color in the U.S.; they gloss it over or simply don't talk about anything that happened between the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement. Keep that in mind as you approach them.

Practice!

If you know you're going to see racist Uncle Joe at Thanksgiving, or you have a meeting scheduled that includes a colleague who likes to tell racist jokes, practice asserting your opinions beforehand. Get a friend to help you, talk to your cat or dog, or talk to the mirror. You might feel silly, but it really will help.

Keep your expectations reasonable.

No matter how brilliantly you argue, you will probably not change someone's entire worldview in one conversation – or even in 10 of them. That's okay. Small steps count. If you get a response like, "Huh, I never thought of it that way," that's progress.

Write it down.

If you don't feel comfortable speaking up in public, or you feel it's not appropriate to call out racism in a particular situation, try speaking to them one-on-one or writing them an email or letter. This may take the pressure off you. But it would be great if you could work up to speaking out in public to send the message to everyone around you that racism is not acceptable. It's not as hard as you think!

Take care of yourself.

Notice your limits and respect them. This is hard work! It's okay to end a conversation if you get tired or feel like it's not accomplishing anything.

Check your company policy.

If you run into racism at work, talk to your Human Resources department about the company policy on hate speech, harassment or racism. Anything other than a small business should have a policy and procedure in place for dealing with these issues. HR can help you figure out how to deal with the situation appropriately.

Some common racist statements and suggested responses

Slavery was over 150 years ago! What are they still complaining about?

Slavery didn't just disappear. It was replaced with Jim Crow laws that mandated racial segregation in housing, schools, public buildings, bathrooms. basically every aspect of social life. And separate was nowhere near equal. These laws also prevented blacks from voting — which meant that black folks had very little institutional power to try to change these laws. Racial attitudes also did not change overnight. Violence against black people was commonplace and whites deliberately used it to keep blacks "in their place." Lynching — white mobs executing black people, typically black men — was common up through the 1930s. More than 3,000 black people were murdered in this way between 1880 and 1968. That's just the ones that were documented — and you heard right, the last

one was in 1968. This was nothing less than a 100-year domestic terrorism campaign. If that environment of fear was how your grandparents and parents grew up, how would that impact how they raised you? How quickly would you get over that?

Okay, fine, things were bad until the '60s. But we changed all that! We had the Civil Rights Movement! Haven't we dealt with racism?

No. While racism is less overt these days, it still exists. Again, attitudes have not changed overnight. For example, several studies have found that employers are less than half as likely to offer an interview to someone with a “black-sounding” name than a “white-sounding” one – even when their resumés are identical. The most recent study was done in Chicago and Boston in 2009. Those employers might be perfectly nice people who’ve never used a racial slur or said an overtly racist thing in their lives. But when they are less likely to interview people with the same qualifications based only on assumptions about the applicant’s race, that’s straight-up racism.

What's wrong with telling jokes like that? Stereotypes always have a grain of truth in them. That's why they're funny.

Stereotypes are dehumanizing. They encourage us to treat people as one-dimensional rather than as unique individuals. Every time you tell a racist joke, you are reinforcing those stereotypes — the ones that are at the back of the minds of employers, police, politicians and others who have the power to make decisions that have huge impacts on the lives of real people. Stopping telling and laughing at those jokes — and letting others know that you think they are not okay — is an easy way that you can work for equality and promote positive relations between whites and people of color.

Oh, lighten up, it was just a joke.

We don't have to spend the whole afternoon talking about this, but this issue is important to me, so I want to address it. Letting it go makes it seem like I think it's okay, and I don't.

Black people call each other the N-word. Why can't I use it?

A lot of black folks never use that word. It's deeply hurtful to many people. And context matters! It sounds different coming from a white person. You know how it feels differently for you to complain about your partner, your parents, or your kids than when other people do it? It's not up to you to police what black people do. But it is up to you to choose not to hurt people unnecessarily with racial slurs.

What's wrong with calling someone an illegal or an illegal alien?

Well, it sounds like you're questioning their right to exist! A person can't be illegal; an action can be. Reducing a complicated individual to one action — crossing into the U.S. without legal documentation — is reductive, and it isn't very nice. And calling someone

an alien is literally dehumanizing! That person is still a person. The polite term is “undocumented immigrant.”

Illegal immigrants are dragging down our economy.

Actually, they provide a huge boost to the economy! They create jobs by adding their productivity, forming new businesses, spending their money on goods and services, and paying taxes. Yes, they pay taxes — sales tax, property tax, and often payroll tax, too.

We shouldn't offer amnesty programs! Why should we reward illegal behavior?

Why shouldn't we offer amnesty programs to people who want to live in the U.S., work, and raise their families here? Amnesty programs are actually good for the economy — as well as for immigrant families. Research shows that after the 1986 amnesty program, three million immigrants who obtained documented legal status were able to obtain better educations and better paying jobs, even during a recession, which resulted in more consumer spending and increased tax revenue. And amnesty programs mean that immigrant families get to stay together, rather than stranding children born here with no support system or forcing them to return to a culture they don't know, where they may not even speak the language.

But I have a friend who's a person of color who uses that word/makes these jokes/thinks this is okay!

Well, people of color are not a monolith. They don't all agree. And between you and your friend, some things might be okay because you have a shared history and context. But that doesn't change the fact that many people of color find such comments, in any form, racist, hurtful, divisive and insulting. Also, you are reinforcing stereotypes that have real consequences and harming your relationships with others by sowing the seeds of division. Wouldn't you rather be welcoming? Who knows what you're missing out on by alienating people with just a few things you say and can easily change?