

## How To Talk with Other Whites About Racism

Our recent election has both **emboldened** the ever-present racism our country, and catalyzed some whites who have not necessarily been active in racial justice in the past to want to be active now. This guide will help you learn how to talk to other whites about racism, and is transcribed by [Project LETS](#) from a webinar by [Beth Berila, Ph.D.](#)

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This [webinar](#) offers strategies for White racial justice allies to talk with other Whites about racism. The first part offers some useful context and mindfulness strategies for engaging in antiracist work in transformative ways. The second part addresses common responses that arise in these conversations and offers ways of reframing them. The webinar addresses racism, white privilege, white guilt, and white fragility, offering strategies to dismantle them that are grounded in mindfulness and feminist antiracism.

### What to expect:

- Get clear on our intentions
  - Understand why we're coming to our work
  - Understand we need to come back when the work gets difficult
- People enter these conversations from different places
  - People enter at different levels of **racial awareness**, and different levels of **racial commitment**
- Tools for addressing those different reactions

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- The same tool does not work in every context
- Mindfulness practices/tools to help with those moments
- Address common responses to these conversations
- White privilege, white guilt, white fragility

## Why white people?

- White people have **different work to do** on the journey towards racial justice and the work of creating racial justice and dismantling racism
- Many communities of color are **really tired of educating white people** because that burden is so often placed on communities of color
- Racism is **absolutely evident to communities of color**, and often not white folks-- so the burden falls to people of color (which is an added burden, because racism is already doing violence to them)
- It can be very frustrating when white people expect communities of color to educate them
- This is where allies and accomplices need to step in and **do the work to educate other white people.**
- **There are things that white people need to say to other white people**
- Communities of color have different work to do when it comes to racial justice
- We can't do the work if we are not **also doing our own work** in dismantling white privilege. We can't assume we get it, and go talk to other white people and expect them to do the work. No matter how long we've known about white privilege and doing the work towards racial justice, **this is a lifelong process** and we still have work to do. It's like peeling back an onion.
- White privilege is insidious. Even when we think we've addressed the first two layers, it will pop back up sometimes; and keep regrowing itself.
- **Think on two levels:** doing your own work; and helping others do the work they need.

*“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” - Lilla Watson, Aboriginal Activist Group*

- It is problematic and deceptive when people say they want to help communities of color
- It may **seem like a good intention**-- but it easily morphs into a white savior idea where you whisk in and be the hero
- **Communities of color don't need to be saved**-- they've been advocating for their wellbeing, they've been fighting racism, surviving, and thriving for eons. They do not

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need white people to save them. And the idea that white people could do that already assumes a power dynamic. It is **patronizing**.

- A better way: whites have a stake in dismantling racism too. Racism dehumanizes everybody-- **in very different ways and to very different degrees**.
  - Racism **cuts us off from each other**.
  - This should be our motivation for doing the work

Racism circulates in the air. It is reinforced throughout society every single day. Disconnection and dehumanization is a very powerful motivation for dismantling racism. **We need to get very clear on why we're doing this work as whites:** it's the right thing to do, it is justice work, because everyone's humanity is devalued by racism.

**Get clear on that intention.** It's important not to do the work of dismantling racism, and then turn around to communities of color and look for praise. Some folks want the pat on the back that they're being a good ally; but that pat on the back may never come. **We can't do this for cookies.** We do this because it is the right work to do and because we are all hurt by racism.

*Journal Exercise:* What's your motivation to work towards racial justice?

## This work is a lifelong process.

No matter how long we've been doing the work, there is always more work to do. This is a lifelong process. We never actually **get there** in a society that continually bombards us with messages about racism and the inherent superior value of whiteness.

Some people think they get it, and whenever we think we get it, that's when we should double down on the self-reflection. **There is a phrase, "if you see the Buddha kill the Buddha."** If you think you get it, that's when you need to re-think things.

If you grew up in a neighborhood that's mostly people of color, or you're dating a person of color, or if you mostly work with black colleagues, or you're parents to a child of color-- **that doesn't necessarily mean we get it.** And it doesn't take us off the hook from continuing to educate ourselves, and learn, and do the work.

If we've had those experiences, chances are we know a lot more than somebody who has never had contact with communities of color. But that doesn't mean we get it. **Particularly when issues of racism are so complex.** And they look different for different communities of color.

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African American communities have slightly different lived experiences and historical experiences of racism than do Asian Americans, than do Native American communities, or Chicana communities. Even within each of those umbrella frameworks, there are significantly different systems in place. So a Vietnamese American is different than a Hmong American. So **no matter how much we've been educating ourselves, it doesn't mean we know all of the issues.** Particularly when the issues continue to change.

You can think about it like, **you're constantly learning and filing each of the new pieces of new information, and experiences, and voices that you hear into a filing cabinet in your mind or heart;** knowing that there is always more to learn. So constantly self-reflecting on our levels of awareness (and being humble) -- and learning what we do and do not see and experience-- is one of the really important mindfulness tools to bring to racial justice work.

## Why mindfulness?

- There are links between mindfulness and social justice
  - Mindfulness brings critical tools to social justice-- to unlearning and dismantling racism
- **Mindfulness:** Anything that brings a deep critical self-reflection, being in the moment, embodied awareness
  - Could be Buddhism, could be yoga, dance, drumming, journaling, contemplative art, etc.

## Tools and Frameworks

- **Beginner's mind:** Always coming back to the sense that we have more to learn
- Self-study (*svadhyaya*)
- **Cultivating the witness:** The witness is bigger than the current experience
  - Our current experience is emotional, psychological, physical, embodied
  - Sometimes we get lost in that experience, and we have no perspective on that experience
  - The witness is an idea of getting bigger than the experience
  - You still have the experience in an embodied way, but you also have some perspective
  - Social justice work, feminist, anti-racist work, has been doing this for a long time-- from an intellectual perspective
    - Mindfulness can offer an embodied perspective to join the intellectual one

- **Cultivating the ‘pause’**
  - Rather than having the gut reaction which may or may not serve us in a given moment, we can: witness what we’re experiencing, get bigger than the moment, hit the pause button, and reflect on whether our gut reaction is what we want to do (*Does it align with our values? Is it useful? Do we want to make a different choice?*)
  - The pause button begins to let us listen deeply to ourselves and to our community members in a way that lets us discern what’s actually happening here (a little more productively)
  - One of the ways that racism works is by so deeply embedding ideologies or belief systems in our society through unequal power dynamics that a lot of what’s happening is *boom boom boom* -- they “just happen.” If we can slow down the process enough to reflect on-- *why is it happening, why is it happening this way, who benefits, who is marginalized and done violence by that?*-- then maybe we can begin to make different choices
- **Power of intention**
  - Being more intentional about the choices we make
  - Coming back to why we’re doing the work we’re doing
- **Tools for remaining grounded**
  - Dismantling whiteness is **hard work**, our buttons will be pushed, and we’ll be emotional, pissed off, scared, and overwhelmed
  - Learning to remain grounded in those moments can help us make more intentional choices
- **Sitting with discomfort**
  - Dismantling white privilege and challenging what many call white supremacy and systems of racism is going to involve some discomfort
  - **If you’re not feeling uncomfortable, chances are you’re not doing the work**
  - There’s an ideology of trying to preserve comfort, particularly for dominant groups-- so it’s built around a sense of maintaining white comfort
  - We’re not taught to sit with discomfort
  - **So - sit with the discomfort!** Whatever discomfort you’re feeling at being told something you’ve done is racist is really uncomfortable; but it’s not the same as the deep pain and violence of the person who just experienced racism.
  - **There’s a difference between pain and violence and discomfort.**
  - Sitting with discomfort instead of trying to avoid it or wallowing in white guilt is the goal
- **Bear witness and take accountability**
  - Bear witness to our own experience, our reactions, and the experiences of communities of color

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- **It might be painful to take accountability for your role in the process**
- **Generating new options**
  - *The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house - Audre Lorde*
  - We can't use the same old practices and structures and strategies and hope to get a different outcome. We need new ways of being with each other.
  - Mindfulness combined with social justice can help us do that
- **Coming from a place of compassion**
  - Systems of oppression automatically create ***us and them*** dynamics, and usually the language of social justice is *dominant groups and marginalized groups* (us/them)
  - Dominant = groups given advantages in society
  - Marginalized = groups disempowered through systems of oppression
    - POC, disabled folks, LGBTQ+ folks
  - This automatically creates an us/them
  - If we take a righteous position towards other whites, then we perpetuate an us/them -- which is not helpful
    - People don't hear from that perspective
  - **We all have had a journey!**
  - Compassion doesn't have to be touchy-feely; **it can be fierce**

Mindfulness can be incredibly productive **when combined with social justice**. However, there are also ways in which mindfulness can be used to shore up racism:

- Culturally appropriating traditions and cultures; taking it away and white people making money
- Teaching mindfulness programs that teach POC how to survive/become complacent with systems of oppression, rather than changing those systems of oppression themselves, etc.

There can be all kinds of ways that mindfulness actually shores up racial injustice.

**Journal Exercise:** Are you uncomfortable yet? What does it feel like to be uncomfortable? What do you want to do when you are uncomfortable?

## Foundational Definitions

- **Race**
  - A social construction (does not mean it doesn't have very **real, material consequences**-- but if something is socially constructed, that means it can change;

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so we need to be asking-- why does it take this particular form now? who benefits?)

- There is no biological root to racial identities
  - Historically specific
    - Looks different over different historical moments
  - Changes over time and over different cultural locations
    - For example, what it means to be a certain skin color can change in different parts of the world; and the certain power dynamics that get attached can change
    - Whiteness has changed over the years
- **Racism**
  - Structural, systemic, embedded throughout society
  - Bigger than personal interactions
  - Manifests in social institutions-- media, educational settings, the government, the legal system, the health care system
  - Learned behavior
  - Creates power dynamics that marginalize POC over and over (**pattern of injustice**)
  - Some people think about racism on an individual level, like individual attitudes, but it's way bigger than that
  - A system that disadvantages some, but over-advantages others
    - **By extension, whites are over-empowered and given over-advantages**
- **Privilege**
  - Unearned benefits granted to members of the dominant group, that are denied to members of the marginalized group
  - People who get privileges are taught not to see them; take it for granted
  - In the case of racism in the US (and Western industrialized countries) the **operative privilege is white privilege**
  - Peggy McIntosh wrote a famous piece *Unpacking the Invisible Backpack of White Privilege* which includes things like:
    - *As a white person, I don't get followed in stores*
    - *I have no problem getting people to do my hair*
    - *If I want to wear makeup, I can easily find something in my skin tone, etc.*
  - These are privileges that when you get them, you are taught not to see them-- but they make life harder for people who are denied them
  - So when people don't get ahead because of the combination of a system of advantage and the white privilege they are denied, then **they get blamed for that**
- **Microaggressions**

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- Daily acts of racism that are seemingly little, but they're so cumulatively painful, that really, they're **macroaggressions**
- Sometimes people only see racism as hate crimes-- the really blatant acts of large scale racism like Japanese Internment camps
- And those are examples of racism, but **it's important to also look at the daily manifestations of it**; which on their own, seem like they're little; but they're so cumulative, and they happen so often, that they're deeply painful
  - Like a wound that never gets to heal because it is constantly poked
  - A white person may feel like *Oh my gosh it's not a big deal, it's such a little thing, you're overreacting*-- because they're only seeing the one act; they're not putting it in the wider context of how often this happens
  - But for the person of color who has just experienced that microaggression, it's the 500th time that week it's happened; and it's reinforced by the seemingly small and large scale examples of racism that continue to do violence.
- Helping other whites see that to them it may seem small **but they need to bring that wider perspective**
- Sometimes using microaggression is deceptive (macroaggression)
- **Positionality**
  - Our location/identity in the world (everybody has one)
- **Intersectionality**
  - How our gender identity, racial identity, sexual identity, national identity, ability identity, religious identity-- all intersect together to create unique recipes of our positions in society in power dynamics
    - The term was coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in a 1989 essay that asserts that antidiscrimination law, feminist theory, and antiracist politics all fail to address the experiences of black women because of how they each focus on only a single factor.
    - Though originally applied only to the ways that sexism and racism combine and overlap, intersectionality has come to include other forms of discrimination as well, such as those based on class, sexuality, and ability.
  - There may be ways we're privileged, and ways we're marginalized
  - Beth: I am a white woman who is middle class, not currently living with a disability, queer, living in the US
    - Privileged: white, abled bodied, US, middle class
    - Marginalized: woman, queer
  - Beth: But even my identity of being a woman is intersected by being a white woman. It is important to recognize we still have different identity locations, and different ways we might be marginalized.



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- And we (white folks) might be uncomfortable by the idea that we're the dominant group; **we might be confused and feel we're really marginalized some ways in our lives, and that's real. But it's also really important not to erase the power of whiteness.**
- Talking about whiteness right now does not overlook the ways we might be marginalized. It's a strategic focus for the moment to understand how we might do particular work in dismantling racial justice.

**Reflect:**

*All whites benefit from racism. Reverse racism does not exist.*

What is your experience of these statements? What's your gut reaction?

These are important questions when we do the work of dismantling racism with other whites. Many whites have very strong reactions to these statements (you may or not have). **But let's unpack this:**

- Saying that all whites benefit from racism is not saying that all whites are racist
- Think about the definition of racism-- a system of disadvantage for people of color, while over-advantaging white people. That's how oppression works. By keeping some people down, and lifting others up.
- If you are a member of the dominant group, you get all kinds of benefits that you may not have asked for, but nevertheless come. **These are systematic advantages.**
- It doesn't mean we all access those benefits to the same degree, particularly if we are marginalized in other ways
- Some people will say all whites are racist as well

Many whites don't feel like they benefit from racism. Let's explore that: **why not?** One of the places this really becomes salient is when whites are marginalized by other aspects of their identity-- like working class whites.

- Many whites will say something is reverse racism
- Within this framework of racism, **reverse racism cannot exist**
- Historically, communities of color have never had the power and privilege to enact particular ideas in the way whites have
- **Prejudice:** misinformation about a particular group based on very little information-- a pre-judgment
  - Harmful, no matter when it happens

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- Everyone can have prejudicial ideas
  - Black people can have prejudicial ideas about Latino communities, etc.
- **Prejudice is not the same as racism-- it requires systematic power to put those prejudicial ideas into action**
  - Using prejudicial ideas to form policy, laws, media portrayal, educational curriculum, etc.
- Historically, communities of color have not had access to that type of power
- While they may be prejudiced, it is not possible for them to be demonstrating reverse racism because **it does not exist**

## Key strategies to use when talking about racism with other whites

### Context:

- Where are you? How much time do you have? Are you in an elevator and somebody just said something really racially problematic and you need to interrupt that, but you don't have 20 minutes to be in a discussion? **Then you need one or two quick one-liners that can interrupt that moment and reframe it.**
- Are you in a position where you have a lengthy conversation? Then you may need a different strategy.
- **Also, what are the stakes here?** Are you at work, and the person who said something is your boss and you really need a job; so you need a way to interrupt that and reframe it, that doesn't cost you your job?
- Is it a family gathering where you can have a lengthier conversation? And there's a lot of family baggage in the room? You need to think about the different contexts and parameters, so that you can think about which strategy is most useful in this moment.

**Where is the person on race and racial issues?** Are they willing to transform? This does not mean you just avoid the people who aren't willing to transform. But you definitely use different strategies. Talking to an avowed KKK member will be a very different conversation than talking to a well-meaning white liberal who just hasn't thought about certain things. You need different strategies, and need to know how they're coming to the conversation.

### What is your goal?

- Shut it down
- Engage in a discussion to get the person to re-think some things, and begin to change their actions and mind
  - **You need to meet people where they are in order to transform**

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Meeting people where they are is a loaded topic in social justice communities. But we're talking to whites here. Whites have a **different responsibility to meet people where they are**. We're not talking about expecting people of color to meet people where they are-- that would be really inappropriate. Whites have a different emotional, intellectual, and political burden when we're doing this work. If we really want to transform other white folks, we need to sometimes meet them where they are. Not so they will stay there, but so they can hear us as we dialogue and move their thinking around racial justice. **The goal is to transform, but we need to do so in a way that they can hear.**

For some of us, there are certain moments when that's really hard to do-- but thinking about our particular challenges with that will be helpful and make us more effective.

### Calling Out

- Allows for righteousness (demonize other person)
- Create an *us vs. them* and the *us* knows more
- Positions "*us*" as right
- Often results in a more deeply entrenched position

When people are called out, they feel ashamed. There are times and places where it is important to **shut things down**, but calling out is a limited strategy if your goal is transformation. Also, often, onlookers take sides; which can create a more entrenched *us and them*.

### Calling In

- Recognizes our interconnectedness (no us/them)
- Engages in a dialogue for transformation
- Remembers the humanity of the person
- Onlookers engage and learn too
- More compassionate

**Think about when each strategy will be most effective for whatever goal you have surrounding changing ideas about whiteness.**

## White Racial Identity Development Model (Helms)

- Contact
- Disintegration
- Reintegration

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- Pseudo-independent
- Immersion/Emmersion
- Autonomy

*Adapted from Beverly Tatum*

If you want to choose the right tool or strategy so that white folks will hear the conversation about racism and whiteness, then you need to think about where they're coming into the conversation-- because there are different stages. And it's not entirely linear. They circle back around-- we may be at one stage, and move back to the previous one.

There are also racial identity development models for people of color, but we'll focus on the white one.

### **1. Contact**

- Oblivious to racism
- Lack of understanding about racism and white racial identity
- Won't see whiteness as a racial identity
- Minimal experiences with communities of color
- People will talk about being colorblind, but will say-- *my neighbor* and *my black neighbor*
  - They will mark the races of communities of color, but not whiteness

### **2. Disintegration**

- Person becomes conflicted and unresolved about racism
- Moral dilemmas when they notice racism-- slowly beginning to notice
  - Still going to say some opposite things
- *I don't believe I'm racist, but I don't want a black President*
- Starting to see some moral conflict (dissonance about realizing whiteness)
- Begin to question things

### **3. Reintegration**

- Dominance of whiteness is so reinforced → pushed back
- Shores up whiteness as a defense mechanism
- Dissonance is resolved by moving back into the dominant narrative
- Blames people of color for their problems instead of seeing racism
- **Painful insight leads you to →**

### **4. Pseudo-Independent**

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- Really try to understand how racism works and how whiteness is constructed
- Reach out to communities of color, and POC who are very similar to them (either economically, or in some other way)
- Still try to reinscribe some sameness, but trying to begin to understand
- Intellectual, and not experiential or affective understanding
- **If attempt to navigate racism is supported and reinforced →**

### 5. Immersion/Emmersion

- Focus on what it means to be white and how that has been constructed
- Challenge white bias and white privilege
- Become more active in dismantling racism
- Allies usually live here

### 6. Autonomy

- Increased awareness of one's whiteness
- Reduced feelings of guilt
- Acceptance of one's role in perpetuating racism
- White non-racist identity (white active non-racist identity)

**Why is this helpful?** It helps us explain why different people are at different stages; and it helps us anticipate what types of statements might be made, so we have better strategies for conversing. And it's not so much so that we can diagnose, but instead of being so frustrated, it can help us by saying, **this is how racism works-- by keeping white people in the contact stage, where they don't even have to see racism. Maybe communities of color are so frustrated when white people are like 'oh my god, I just discovered racism.'** That's a really privileged and frustrating thing to hear, which is why it's so important for white people to do this work.

For communities of color who have to survive racism on a daily basis, to hear that their white friend has just been like **'oh my god, I just discovered racism'** is a really painful, frustrating, and angering thing to hear. White accomplices and allies can really step in here to help people move along.

Strategies used in an autonomy stage are not the same as those used in the disintegration stage. They just won't hear you.

**Example:** I was teaching about LGBTQ+ issues once (similar stages)-- someone was basically in the autonomy stage and really knew a lot about LGBTQ+ identities; and always made things

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more complex. Except people in the contact stage were so overwhelmed, they didn't get it. They didn't even have the foundational stuff. So every time it was made more complex, they just kept being overwhelmed and so the two stages couldn't effectively dialogue with one another, because they needed different tools.

**Mindfulness lets us:** be bigger than the moment, temper our reactivity to be instead be strategic, sit with our own reactions and learn to respond to the actions of whoever we're communicating with

If you're interested, look up racial identity development models for people of color-- it can really help you understand why people are acting certain ways. We can then more selectively draw on tools to move the conversation.

## Common Responses (How to interrupt/reframe)

Now we'll focus on strategies and skills to use to become a more effective accomplice working for racial justice.

**“You're being oversensitive, I didn't mean that”**

**“I meant it as a compliment”**

**“You're making a big deal out of nothing”**

1. Contextualize
  - a. Why that particular action was problematic
2. Explain how microaggressions work
3. Acknowledge that they didn't mean it, but remind them that impact outweighs intentions
  - a. It doesn't matter if someone intended for something to be harmful; if it was harmful, it was harmful.
  - b. White people do not get to say that something isn't racism. A person of color gets to say that.**
  - c. If they didn't mean to hurt you, then you can ask them to come back to that intention
    - i. *“If you didn't mean to hurt someone, then let's talk about how you can avoid participating in that in the future”*
4. Gaslighting
  - a. Really powerful tool (used heavily in abusive relationships)
    - i. Ex. if abuser does something really hurtful and the person being abused says they were hurt-- the way the abuser will reclaim power is by saying

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*no, that didn't happen / no, you're reality is not real / no, you're overreacting*

ii. **Person in power denies reality**

1. Dismiss, minimize, invalidate, reframe

iii. **Think about how painful that is.** A person of color has just experienced the violence of racism. And then, they're not even allowed their own voice or experience because that white person redefines reality. That compounds the violence of racism.

5. Notice our own triggers

a. If we are white allies, and we've been in an abusive relationship where gaslighting has occurred, we may have particularly strong feelings when people gaslight communities of color. **Be aware of your own histories and triggers.**

## How to respond when called on privilege:

Don't:

- Dismiss it
- Deny it
- Say why you didn't mean it
- Get defensive
- Get angry

Do:

- Practice sitting with discomfort and creating that pause
- Listen
- Get humble
- Remember context
- Don't say what you meant-- listen
- Reflect. Learn. Double down on your intention to dismantle racism.
- Know that you will make missteps

We do not want the person of color to take care of us, and our anger and our defensiveness. If we're really an ally, **one of our jobs is to learn how to not get angry and defensive.**

Dismantling racism means dismantling your defense mechanisms. People of color have said over and over and over again what they need when they call white people on their privilege, and how frustrated they get when these are the reactions that white people respond with. **Read and work on this stuff, so that we don't force communities of color in our lives to deal with that in us. And if it does happen, intervene and reframe.**

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## “What do you mean I’m privileged? I can barely pay my bills.”

It is not helpful to dismiss this, because this is where intersectionality comes in-- that people can be privileged in some ways, and marginalized in others. When someone is really feeling the marginalization part of their lives, it will be hard for them to hear that they are privileged in other aspects of their lives. If someone is barely getting by and working class, they don't feel privileged. **It's important not to totally dismiss the ways in which they are marginalized.** However, they still have privileges that working class people of color do not get.

One of the ways this response can be handled is by **acknowledging how much they struggle economically**, and discuss how whiteness has been constructed historically. There was a time when white immigrants were considered *others*, and were racialized to a certain degree. People who are now considered white (Irish, Italian, etc.)-- when they were first immigrants to this country, they were forced into low-paying jobs, racially *othered*, and **one of the ways that whiteness got shored up, was when the powers that be realized that it was really dangerous for communities of color who were working class and white working class to bond together around issues of economic marginalization.**

If poor communities of color and poor white people got together and really challenged capitalist exploitation, they would have a lot of power. It was really strategic at a certain historical moment to drive a wedge between those communities, and construct a form of whiteness (lumped in Irish, Italian, etc.) that gives them a little bit of privilege in ways that separate them from communities of color.

There are still ways that working class whites get white privilege in ways that working class communities of color do not get.

**The strategic focus on race can be important:** You understand there are complex portions of people's identities, and ways in which they are marginalized, but there's also a time and a place for a strategic focus for one aspect of one's identity-- in this case, whiteness.

1. Intersectionality
2. Listen carefully: hear the fear behind the statement
3. Divide and conquer
4. How whiteness is constructed

## “People of color only spaces are reverse racism.”



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Any time something is only for people of color, or there's a special scholarship for Latinx people, or an event for Black students-- some white people are going to say that's reverse racism. **There is no such thing as reverse racism when we're talking about systems of advantage and disadvantage.**

1. Come back to our definition of racism as structural
2. Make a parallel the person would understand
  - a. "Sometimes there are groups at rape crisis centers for women or women-identified people only. Do you see why that is necessary? People may be in a particularly raw place in their healing. There is a reason to have women only spaces; **so people can heal in a particular way.** This doesn't mean it's not important to have other spaces where other folks are included and other identities, but there are reasons why spaces that are only for a particular group are needed."
3. Explain why they are needed and what function those spaces serve
  - a. Create a brief haven from a world of racism
  - b. Talk to each other without white gaze
  - c. Talk in a way where they do not need to be subjected to racism
4. Breathe through your own reactions

### **I know racism existed during slavery, but we've come a long way.**

This is another common response that white people will have-- that racism is something that happened in the past.

**Here it is important to talk about different kinds of racism.** Point out that locating it in the past is a way of disavowing that. If we frame racism as only slavery, or only the internment camps, then maybe it's easier for whites to say we're past that. Although quite honestly, if we look at contemporary society, there are plenty of current manifestations of those same examples. We have a lot of human trafficking that really targets communities of color, which is still a form of slavery in its modern day. We have, here in the US, our President [Elect] is talking about Muslim registries; and spokespeople talking about Japanese internment as models for Muslim registry. So it's problematic to even say those models are in the past; because they're not. But part of it is also talking about the different manifestations of racism.

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**Approach the conversation with fierce compassion: what are they choosing not to see when they see racism as only something in the past?** They're probably choosing not to see our daily microaggressions; or the impact of having so many leaders in the public and private sectors be white and how that excludes so many communities of color, etc. Part of what is going to be important about addressing this response is **teasing out the different manifestations of racism**, and really the legacies of even those historical examples of racism. So slavery might have ended a long time ago-- the particular type of Black slavery that this person might be talking about-- but **we live with the economic, cultural, social, and political legacies of that slavery**. We still live with it. So what are the current manifestations of it?

### **After touching a Black woman's hair without permission: "It's a compliment"**

Just sit with your reaction to that first. And know that whatever reaction you as a white person may be having, Black women's reaction to that is 5000x whatever our reaction might be (but unfortunately, this is all too common):

#### **1. Gaslighting ("it's a compliment")**

- a. If the African-American woman says it's an act of racism, **then it is an act of racism**. Even if the one person doesn't happen to name it as racism, it's important to contextualize it. There are so many complex politics around Black women's hair, and Black woman's rights to their own bodily autonomy. The ability to decide who and when gets to touch them has such a complex and loaded legacy in this country, that it's really important to contextualize that.
- b. **Draw a parallel they experienced to create empathy, without collapsing into sameness**
  - i. Let's say the person is in one of the first two stages of identity development, and they're not ready to hear about gaslighting or the politics of Black women's hair yet. One way to begin might be-- let's say it's a cis woman who touches the Black woman's hair-- maybe a way to approach it could be, "Do you remember when you were pregnant and random strangers kept coming up to you and touching your body and belly without asking you? They just felt like it was okay to touch your body? Do you remember how violated and offended you felt by that?" And get the person to be like, "Oh yeah, I remember that, I felt this, this, and this..." And then you can say, "It's kind of like that, except" -- then here's where you make it more complex. **The idea of using that strategy is you begin to create some empathy so that they can begin to see the experience;** but it's important not to collapse into sameness-- it is not the same thing.

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You still have to contextualize it, and you still have to point out the gaslighting.

*Not one strategy will work in any given moment!*

**Reflection:**

At this stage, sometimes people can feel overwhelmed. Like there's a right way to do it and they don't know what it is. Notice and sit with the complexities of what you're feeling. And know that whatever you're feeling, other people are feeling it and have felt it too.

**I don't know what to do. I feel guilty any time race comes up, because I feel like all people of color are blaming all white people.**

This is a big one-- the idea of white guilt. That white people feel *blamed* when racism is pointed out. And/or they feel completely overwhelmed. They don't know what to do. Even when they try to do something it's pointed out that it's done wrong-- so they feel really immobilized.

1. **Recognize white guilt** (the idea of feeling guilty and blamed)
  - a. Helpful to witness and reframe that feeling
  - b. White guilt is a **defense mechanism**-- the system of white supremacy and racism uses white guilt to shore up white privilege and racism
  - c. As long as white people feel guilty, then they begin to spiral in their own guilt and overwhelm and regress into previous racial identity development phrase when whiteness is shored up, or they spiral into immobilization.
2. Shift from **blame to responsibility**
  - a. Blame doesn't help the white person who is feeling it and it certainly doesn't help racial justice
3. Whites have an **investment in redefining whiteness to be more liberatory** (or dismantling it entirely)
  - a. You didn't ask to be born into white privilege and white supremacy. You didn't create the historical legacy of whiteness that you inherited, so once you start taking responsibility for your current role in the current system of racism, then you get to play a more active role in redefining racism and redefining racial constructs and redefining whiteness.
  - b. Why do you want the definition of whiteness that you didn't participate in writing?

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- c. If you begin to disrupt racial dynamics and racism, then you can begin to more proactively define whiteness in a way that is more humane (or dismantle whiteness entirely)

### 3 kinds of racism (metaphor of moving walkways):

1. **Active**-- KKK, neo-nazis (running on the moving walkway)
2. **Passive**-- feel the white guilt, don't want to be racist, but are overwhelmed when they begin looking at the impacts of how deeply racism is embedded in society (on the walkway, still going to get to the same place because the system moves in the same direction)
3. **Active anti-racism**-- a whole other option! Get off the walkway! Walk in a different direction! Dismantle the walkway! You can't do this if you're wallowing in guilt.

### **Guilt is a reaction to the system. Particularly if you haven't paid attention to it before.**

Learn to move out of the guilt. See it as a defense mechanism that keeps us in place, and reframe it as responsibility-- *okay, what am I going to do?*

This *I don't know what to do* or *everything I do seems to be wrong*-- go back and understand that you are going to make mistakes in this process! It is natural, it's going to happen. Come back to beginner's mind, do the best you can, know when you make mistakes other white accomplices will be there to help you. **And keep trying.**

## When Whites Break Into Tears

This is **white fragility**. Yes its unbelievably painful to recognize how deeply entrenched systems of oppression are, and to listen to the lived experiences of communities of color who are surviving (or not surviving) these systems of oppression.

It's okay to feel the pain. Whites should be feeling the pain. *Can you really witness the pain of racial violence and not feel it?*

But the question is what you do with it. If you're in a mixed group of people (white & communities of color) and racism is being discussed and white people start crying **it is very frustrating to communities of color. Because what it does is center whiteness.** Then everyone moves to take care of the white person who is crying. When the people who actually have to

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directly deal with the racial violence on a daily basis are communities of color, and who is taking care of them?

**White fragility is an extension of white guilt.** A very powerful defense mechanism that shores up racism. It's okay to feel the pain and cry sometimes--but be mindful of where you do it and who your support networks are.

“White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates the race-based stress. This insulated environment of racial protection **builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress**, leading to what I refer to as White Fragility. White Fragility is the state in which even a minimum of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium.” -- Robin DiAngelo (coined the term, scholar)

**Reflection: What idea from this quote is really standing out to you?**

The way that white supremacy works (and we're using white supremacy deliberately to refer not just to neo-nazis, but a society that continues to construct whiteness as the norm, and continue to marginalize and disenfranchise communities of color)-- what happens is that the whole society is structured to privilege whiteness. White people are **taught not to see racism.**

They're insulated from race-based stress that communities of color experience on a daily basis-- to such a degree that whites expect racial comfort, and have a really low tolerance for dealing with racial stress. Whites are so used to insulated equilibrium-- whenever anyone mentions racism or the pain of racism, whenever a POC points out racism (even if they're being really “gentle”)-- white people can't handle it, it's so intolerable to them. They feel angry, guilty, attacked, they break down crying. They want to leave the situation. They argue. They say they're being demonized.

**It is not the responsibility of people of color to take care of white people, or say things gently to white people. Because racism isn't gentle. The violence that people of color experience on a daily basis is not gentle.**

If white people can't even handle the “gentleness”, when POC are rightfully angry or experiencing intense emotions at the extreme violence they have to face, then white people *really* can't handle that.

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**It's not useful to say "you shouldn't be crying."** White people can move in and acknowledge the pain; but also acknowledge it's partly white privilege that has protected people from having to see it all along. It's white privilege that keeps white people from having to experience the same racial trauma that communities of color have to experience on a daily basis. **We can bear witness to the pain, but reframe it.**

And people will say-- "If you voted for Donald Trump, unfriend me." While I understand that response, unfriending everyone who voted for Trump is a way of shoring up this white racial equilibrium. Then it keeps your Facebook feed really nice and protected, so you only see things from people who agree with you. But people of color **don't get to avoid racism.** So white accomplices really need to step up and have conversations with other white people, even when it's uncomfortable.

It's really important to have compassion for people having the ranges of reactions under white fragility. **But it's also important to help move those reactions, or better/more useful ways of expressing them.** Many communities of color have been saying for a long time that it's really painful and angering even, to hear white people get upset when they suddenly hear racism exists. **Communities of color have not had the luxury of not noticing it.** And you can say that with compassion.

**I don't see color. Why can't we all just get along? We are all alone.**

### 1. Colorblindness

- In a racist society-- in a society with racism as deeply embedded as they are in our current society-- there is no way to not see color. It is not possible. Because society has been so deeply shaped around racial divisions, color is absolutely seen. People who say they don't see color are lying to themselves. **The idea means they're choosing not to see the racial divisions and injustices-- and it is a choice. One that communities of color don't have.**
- *I don't see color* is in the first stage of racial identity development model. You need to use a tool to meet them at that stage. So begin pointing out systems of racism and where they actually do see color.
- Even in an ideal world, colorblindness is **not an ideal goal.** Communities of color don't want their racial identity erased because it is an important part of who they are. It's not about erasing identity It's about **not attaching power dynamics to identities.** Because racial identity makes our world beautiful! People want the ability to be their full selves-- including their racial or ethnic identity-- without having power dynamics attached to

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those differences. **Colorblindness is not ideal.** See it, acknowledge it, and learn to value it instead of giving some people privilege and marginalizing others.

## 2. Spiritual bypassing (both institutional and individual)

- In an absolute sense, sure we're all human. But we're not there yet. We live in a society with all kinds of baggage that separates us. In an absolute sense, it might be nice to say *we are all one*-- typically, it's an attempt to jump over all the hard work to get to the absolute. **But we're not there**, and there are all kinds of divisions in the room that need to be dealt with.
- Usually people will say *why can't we just all get along* when people are trying to point out the divisions and inequalities. There is a sense that *why can't we all get along* is said to **avoid the hard conversations**. Instead, let's use our mindfulness practices not to avoid the hard conversations, but to be able to move through them. If we ever want to get to the absolute sense, if that is even a goal, we need to use mindfulness and social justice skills to actually get there and it means doing a lot of hard work.

**“I want to help, but people of color are so angry. They would be more effective if they were more polite. People of color would be less angry if you just meditated. This a place of ‘love’ not a place for anger.”**

1. **Tone policing:** People would be willing “if you said it in the right way”-- that statement gives white people the power to say what the **right** way is.
  - a. There is a meme circulating Facebook-- of the Civil Right protests, Black Lives Matter protestors-- and each time, people are like *protest, but not like that*. But then Colin Kaepernick is wrong as well for taking a knee and silently protesting. They're still like, *not like that either*.
  - b. You can't be angry, marching, or quiet.
  - c. This gives white people the power to say when and how communities of color can protest
  - d. There are **very good reasons why people of color are angry**
  - e. Anger is a legitimate response to racial injustice
  - f. It is not for white people to say what a legitimate response is!
  - g. People are protesting in all sorts of ways with all sorts of emotional tones
  - h. Sit with the discomfort and recognize there is a good reason for anger
2. **Mindfulness communities need to understand the range of human emotions**
  - a. Anger is not bad-- it can be a catalyst for important change

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- b. People say this because they cannot sit with their own discomfort around anger
  - c. Whiteness does not get to set the terms
3. **Sit with discomfort**
  4. **Understand the uses of anger**

"First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council-er or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action;" who paternalistically feels he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season."

Shallow understanding from people of goodwill is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."

-- *Letter from Birmingham Jail, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., 16 April 1963*

Idea of being more devoted to **order than justice**. The order we're calling for has been defined by the dominant group-- there's a reason to disrupt it.

Who gets to decide how change happens? **White people do not get to decide this for communities of color.**

Search for a video by Janaya Khan-- it's short and she covers:

1. Derailment
2. Minimizing
3. Reduction
4. Tokenism
5. Hurt



## Cultivating Fierce Compassion

The system of white supremacy and racial justice is built for whites not to see these things. While it can be incredibly frustrating, it is important to remember that is the system functioning. So-- meeting people with compassion, not dehumanizing them, but holding them accountable and moving them through dialogue to more compassionate and humanizing practices. **And only doing that with other whites as we're doing our own work.**

**Some things to balance:**

### 1. When to step in and when to step back

- a. Always reflect on this!
- b. Always a challenge when a racist comment is made in the presence of POC-- is this something a POC wants to address? Don't assume you should as a white person. Communities of color have a voice and someone may want to speak on it!
- c. But it is problematic when POC always need to jump in, do the work, and reframe racism. White accomplices should be doing this work too.
- d. It is not always clear which strategy one should take-- cultivate the mindful ability to always reflect
- e. Sometimes you'll make the wrong call-- but add that to your knowledge and experiences for next time

### 2. Don't assume you know what POC need

- a. Read, listen to podcasts, go to events--educate yourselves as much as possible
- b. Listen to communities of color and align with that as much as possible
- c. Don't walk up to POC and say *how do you want me to interrupt racism?* That is inappropriate and puts the burden on them, puts them on the spot, and asks for their permission

### 3. Take risks and know you will make mistakes. Learn from them.

### 4. Balance your own energy to do the work skillfully with the realization that we live in a time where it is critical we do the work.

- a. The less you do self-care, the less skillful you become at the work.
- b. You **will** make mistakes that reinforce racism if you do not create a self-care equilibrium
- c. Self-care will be different for all of us
- d. Recognize it is a privilege to step away from the work-- POC don't get to do this. When someone gets pulled over they don't get to say *I haven't had enough self-care today, can we reschedule?*

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- e. As people in the privileged group it's important to recognize we need to do the work, and balance the need to do it skillfully
- 5. Being an ally is a verb**
  - a. You can't put a badge on and say you're an ally
  - b. It is constant
  - c. It is earned through action
  - d. You don't do it for the cookies or the praise on the back, you do it because it's right
- 6. Know that it will be hard and uncomfortable**
- 7. Know that it is a lifelong process**
- 8. Educate yourself** on the perspective, needs, and experiences of communities of color
- 9. Seek of culturally diverse spaces** (performances, books, podcasts)
  - a. There may be times you have organic conversations with POC-- this is fine!
- 10. Do not ask POC what to do**
- 11. Think about how much you take up space**
  - a. When you're in groups with white folks and POC, take a backseat
  - b. One of the ways white privilege shows up is thinking we as white people have more/better things to say
  - c. Notice how much white people speak vs. how much POC speak
  - d. Pause before you jump in-- doesn't mean you don't have useful things to say, but it's about recognizing the power of whiteness to command attention and space
- 12. Build a community of white antiracist allies to process and think**
  - a. We have our own reactions
  - b. These need to be processed, but not with communities of color
  - c. We have questions, but not to be asked at communities of color

**We're all on a journey together, learning every single day.**

May we all move forward, and do the parts of our work that are ours to do,  
To create a world free of racism,  
Dismantle white supremacy,  
And build a definition of racial identity that empowers everyone--  
That works towards a world for racial justice,  
In which all of our identities are valued,  
And we can all be interconnected.

-- Beth Berila

(transcribed by Project LETS)

How to Talk with Other Whites About Racism

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Beth Berila, Ph.D.

[www.LetsEraseTheStigma.com](http://www.LetsEraseTheStigma.com)

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