

White People Talking to White People: How to Stay Focused and Effective

© Lisa Graustein, in response to the fall 2014 Facebook discussion about un-friending racist friends

1. Be Clear What You Are About:

Why are you talking to this person? Do you want to set a boundary of what is OK to say or do around you? Do you want to challenge an idea or attitude? Do you want to try to create a safer space for yourself and/or others? Do you want to change someone's mind?

Trying to do any of these things is good work to do. They often require different approaches and attitudes, however. So being clear what you are trying to do and why you are trying to do it will help you both stay focused on your goal and be more effective.

Boundary setting: It is always OK to say that using certain language or expressing attitudes of hate or discrimination are not OK things to do around you. People might disagree, get upset, or get on board – but you always have the right to set a boundary. Setting a boundary can allow for other opinions and attitudes, it just limits what is expressed in your hearing. It can create a little, temporary bubble that is less hateful. It is also an invitation for people to think before they speak.

Challenging an idea or attitude: It is always great to challenge ideas or attitudes that are racist. Using your own, lived experience is hardest for the other person to deny. Coming in with facts and examples also helps.

Creating a safer space: This approach can mean asking someone not to say specific words or express certain opinions. It generally focuses on the *impact* of words or actions, as opposed to their validity or intention. This can be a useful angle to take with folks who like to debate or argue a lot, as you are not engaging with what they are saying but how your shared space changes when they say it. Put yourself in the center, “I feel unsafe when . . . because . . .” The person may or may not respect your request, but you have clearly named the dynamic their words or actions are creating, your reaction and opposition to it.

Changing minds: This is often the hardest, as the resistance to really seeing and understanding racism is so strong in our culture. I find that building relationship, asking questions that unearth the real fears, and staying engaged for the long haul have the greatest potential to change minds. This one is often a marathon, and not a sprint.

2. Let's Talk about Racism and not Racists:

I am not particularly interested in how racist some white person is or isn't; I am really interested in how racism shows up among white people all the time. White people tend to freak out and go right into denial when we think we are being called racist. We are **less** likely to do this when talking about racism.

I am not interested in the pseudo-philosophical debate about are all white people inherently racist or will I always be racist. I am really interested in how I can interrupt and stop racism in myself and others. If I am focused on racism, I am not focused on me as a protagonist, but on my part in creating a hostile and lethal environment for humans on this planet. I am engaged in ending a system that dehumanizes people of color and diminishes the humanity of white people.

3. Listen and Ask, Don't Debate:

I have never found debate about racism to be an effective way to change folks' mind. Any white person who wants to have a big, fact-based debate has clearly already thought about this issue a lot and found the resources to support their denial. Arguing, no matter how true my stance, probably won't work. So, why did they spend time thinking about this issue? Why is it important to them that I understand that they think racism doesn't exist or that white cismen are really the ones under systemic attack? What is their experience? Why is this important to them?

This approach takes a lot of patience for me and isn't one I can do if I am angry or pissed off or feeling self-righteous. When I am calm and can be loving to the human being, I can listen and ask the questions that guide me to the open door, even if it is only open a crack. I can listen for where the point of empathy might exist, for where the exception to the denial might live. I can build relationship that allows for the long-term change. I also get more information for how we, as white people, continue to feed this system. With this, I can more specifically and creatively and comprehensively address whiteness and racism.

4. Be Bold:

We need to be bold in our words and our actions. When we step out and say or do the thing that is scary or hard, we stand up for justice and make it easier for others to stand up. I can remember so many times in my life when I have thought, "If only so-and-so were here, she would say/do something about this." Many times, I've then realized I've got to be the one to speak up. But I needed that model to push me, to show me, to remind me that it is possible. Be bold and know that by doing so you give permission for everyone else to be bold. Nothing grows courage more than being courageous.

5. Be Constant:

Keep talking about it. Not in a soap-boxy way, but keep race, racism, and racial justice a part of the conversation, the selection process, the policy-making, the choosing, and the little things of day-to-day life. Keep posting and reading and watching and naming. Sometimes it is these little exposures of the long-term that help bring other white people around. Sometimes it is the knowing that when they are ready, you are someone they can talk to.

6. Let People Know You See Them:

It can be easy to get so angry or frustrated with someone that we want to throw in the towel. We can't. Take a pause, and remind yourself and the other person why you like them, or something you value about them. At its root, racism is about some people saying that another group of people aren't human and aren't worthy of care. We are all human and all worthy of care. What do you like or respect about the white person you are engaging with? Tell them. You can like someone or some things about them without condoning the racism they are perpetuating. Doing this also breaks the pattern we whites have of shunning those we don't like or with whom we disagree.

7. Keep Learning and Talking about Your Ignorance:

Keep reading and listening and watching. Racism in the United States has been built over centuries and there is so much to its construction and maintenance. We've all got to keep learning about how it was created and how it is being perpetuated if we want to end it. It's OK to not know something, but it's not OK to *stay* ignorant. Learn and talk about what you are learning. Model what it is like to not know something and then seek appropriate channels for learning about it (Note: appropriate channels are published materials and public forums, not button-holing the nearest person of color). I read about race a lot and talk about a lot with my friends, in front of our kids. This means both the history and experiences of people of color AND the history and experiences of white people. We need to learn how to talk about ourselves as agents in shaping and ending US racism.

8. Use Your Allies:

Most of us didn't grow up learning how to challenge racism and it can be hard. Find your white allies and use them. Talk about the things that are hard and frightening, talk about the successes and new insights. We are not alone as white people wanting to end racism nor as humans wanting a more just world. Just like being bold, asking for help makes it easier for others to ask for help. I use my allies to vent, cry, and brainstorm with so that when I am engaging with the racism of white people, I am grounded, clear, creative – and tenacious.