

## *Skills Building Resource Page*

### *Practiced Approaches for Confronting Racism*

**Questioning:** Speak in a way that gives people the benefit of the doubt, acting as though they could not possibly mean what they appear to be saying. For example, when a person offers an analysis that appears either subtly or overtly racist, we might respond with a question such as, "When you say \_\_\_\_\_, it sounds like you are saying that \_\_\_\_\_, but I am not sure if this is what you mean?" This offers the person an opportunity to reflect and perhaps alter his or her speech. If the person truly holds racist ideas, this approach surely will not change his or her point of view. But, at least it might disrupt the conversation enough for the speaker to find out that racism is not welcomed or acceptable in your presence. This pattern can continue as needed, with the questions becoming more explicitly challenging. We might actually have to say, "I'm sorry, but that sounds rather racist. Are you comfortable sounding that way?" The essential idea is simply that we act a bit dense, as though we simply cannot believe that an intelligent person would ever say something with such obvious racist overtones.

**Educating:** This approach asks us to make use of the knowledge that we gain and try to inform the people around us why their statements are troubling for us. Note that this approach is not called lecturing. Instead, we can make short statements, such as, "You know, when I hear what you are saying, it reminds of when I thought something similar. But, then I read something that made me realize that \_\_\_\_\_." Or, we might say something like, "Hey, I know sometimes the media makes it seem like that, but I found out recently that \_\_\_\_\_." In both of these sample statements, we avoid directly naming either the person or his or her speech as involving racist elements. Depending upon the need and our own comfort, we can go further. We can say, "Hey, I am sure you don't mean it this way, but it sounds like that idea comes from a perspective that can be seen as pretty racist." With this approach, the words we say may or may not be heard. The person may or may not continue with the subject, stick around to continue the dialogue, or feel comfortable with us. But, whatever the result, we will have let that person know that we are not someone with whom he or she can safely speak using racist speech.

**Expressing personal emotional reaction:** This approach asks us to tell a person making racist comments or jokes what it is like for us to hear those things. By letting the person know how we feel, we are avoiding directly challenging the content of what is being said, but instead asking the person to respect who we are and notice that his or her speech is not okay with us. We might say something like, "When you say that, I feel \_\_\_\_\_ and that makes it hard for me to be here with you." This approach can be especially effective with people close to us because we are not directly challenging the content of what the person is saying as much as the level of respect existing within the relationship. If these folks care about us, won't they want to make sure that we feel good about spending time with them? At least, that is the question we can ask to try and get the person to shift his or her use of language.

**Empathetic relating:** This approach asks us to invite the person speaking to imagine how he or she would feel if a similar negative statement were applied to him or her. We might respond to a racist comment or joke by saying, "Wow, when you say that, I can't help but imagine what those folks would feel if they heard that. Can you imagine what it would feel like if people were sitting around talking about us like that? What if they were teasing about the way...? (Here, we might include something that we sense might be a meaningful stereotype that is used to injure that person's group). We can then ask, "Wow, how would that make you feel?"

**Returning later:** Lastly, we also can give ourselves permission to return to a person once the situation has shifted and deal with the issue at a later time. We might return to a colleague and say, "You know, yesterday (or last week) you said \_\_\_\_\_, and I just want to ask you what you meant. I felt \_\_\_\_\_ hearing it and wanted to check in with you about it." We can choose to question, empathize, educate, or express our own feeling. But this way, even if we miss a moment, we can create a chance to respond once we have developed more clarity about the issue and a plan of approach.

<p><i>Engaging in Conversations around Race with People Close to Us</i></p>	<p><b><i>Begin slowly.</i></b> No need to speak out on every new piece of knowledge all at one time if they are not asking for more. These are our closest relationships. We have plenty of time to initiate our loved ones into this way of seeing the world. Besides, jumping in too quickly might very likely only push them away.</p> <p><b><i>Speak from the heart.</i></b> Refer to recently acquired information and how it has been personally affecting. Ask only for them to listen and to try and understand why we feel as we do.</p> <p><b><i>Demonstrate excitement.</i></b> If we offer some of our new realizations with excitement and interest, we stand a better chance of getting people on board. A sudden shift into anger will likely be alienating and make our journey less appealing.</p> <p><b><i>Challenge sensitively.</i></b> Using the previously described strategy of expressing our personal emotional reaction (from previous page) to statements can be extremely helpful when we need to challenge something said within a dialogue.</p> <p><b><i>Be humble.</i></b> Becoming angry with our families and close friends for not seeing issues of race as we do is a sure way to get shut down and turn them off.</p> <p><b><i>Pick battles carefully.</i></b> Some people will just not be ready to hear what we have to say. Reserve energy for moments when our efforts can make a difference. Retreat and come back a different day, or a different year, depending upon the individual.</p> <p><b><i>Plant seeds.</i></b> Know that we plant seeds every time we witness actively. We might not see immediate results. But, some new epiphany might be growing in someone that will someday emerge, even if we never see the tangible results.</p> <p><b><i>Extend the invitation.</i></b> Invite family and friends to join this journey with you. Give a book on racism or white privilege as a present to someone. Ask someone to watch a movie with you featuring a cast of people of color. Invite someone to attend a culturally/racially diverse art show, musical performance, or other event with you. Ask questions and prompt conversation to see what friends and family are thinking.</p>
<p><i>Inviting Dialogue in Diversity</i></p>	<p>We need to recognize common mistakes often made when engaging in cross-race conversations.</p> <p><b><i>We must learn to avoid enacting the following...</i></b></p> <p><b><i>Being rude.</i></b> We have to really question ourselves about how we approach people. Can we see how our approach might unwittingly dehumanize? Are we conscious of the degree to which we ask a stranger to trust and accept us? Do we ask permission before we attempt to enter a personal, racially loaded dialogue?</p> <p><b><i>Being too self-focused.</i></b> We have to be ready for someone to say “No thanks” to our friendship without feeling personally insulted. History has given a lot of people good reason to be wary of discussions across race. If we can get out of our own head for a while and see that we are not the only ones taking risks, we stand a better chance of getting through the rough spots.</p> <p><b><i>Turning people into objects.</i></b> When we become oversensitive to race issues, we run the risk of treating people more like racial beings than human beings. We must be careful not to turn people into representatives for their race.</p> <p><b><i>We must be able to...</i></b></p> <p><b><i>Be both vulnerable and strong.</i></b> Sometimes we have to extend our hand in friendship and keep it humbly extended in the face of refusal. We must be ready to admit our nervousness, as uncomfortable as it may be.</p> <p><b><i>Dismiss the devil's advocate.</i></b> Arguing facts and possible misinterpretations gets us nowhere. Listening to the felt experience of our friends is far more important.</p> <p><b><i>Value new information.</i></b> If a person of color offers critical feedback, take it as a gift. Resist defensiveness.</p>