

# RACIAL & HEALTH EQUITY: Make It Your Business

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## Learn: Why is it Hard for White People to Talk About Racism?

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In 2020, people across the United States, and the world, took to the streets demanding justice for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and countless other Black Americans killed by the police. As a result, there has been an urgent call for Americans, especially white people, to talk about racism and speak out against it.

For some white people, it has been a welcome invitation, and a relief to be more outward in their pursuit of honest dialogue around structural racism. For most, it has been new territory. Conversations about racism are springing up at the dinner table, at work and places of worship—often for the first time. And white people are finding these conversations challenging, at best, and threatening at their worst.

### So, Why is it So Difficult?

Essentially, an incomplete understanding of racism is pervasive throughout most of white America. Many consider racism to be individual or interpersonal acts of hate against a person or group of people based on their ethnicity. Although this form of racism exists, in comparison, it is a small portion of the problem. It is also easy to separate oneself from. For example, a kind, generous person with friends or family who are people of color might describe themselves as “not racist.”

But, structural racism, a system in which policies, practices and other norms work to perpetuate racial group inequity, is not something an individual does, but is a feature of the social, economic and political systems all around us. So, the challenge for Americans, specifically white Americans, is coming to terms with a deeper understanding of racism. An understanding that suddenly removes them from the safety of innocence and places them firmly in the discomfort of culpability.

This new understanding challenges the identities of “good, moral people” and triggers a defensive response. Anger, fear and guilt lead to behaviors like argumentation, silence and withdrawal. And white Americans retreat to both defend their identities as “not racist” and deny their culpability as contributors to structural racism. This privilege to flee the conversation, instead of working through the discomfort, maintains the white equilibrium of racial dominance.

# Reflect: How Can We Better Talk About Racism?

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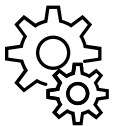
How does structural racism differ from interpersonal racism? Spend 5-10 minutes listing the examples you know of structural racism. If you're not sure, go online and search "structural racism United States."

Who is in your sphere of influence? Who is a safe person you could openly practice dialogue about racism with? Create a sphere of influence map: 1) Write the name of the person you're closest to in the center of a piece of paper. 2) Draw a circle around the first name and write the next two people you influence outside the circle. 3) Circle everything on the page so far and list four more people, who you influence, around the outer circle. Use this diagram as a tool to start a conversation with the people you're closest to.

What does a peaceful society look like to you? Spend 10-15 minutes imagining a world that is truly at peace. What does it look like? What does it sound like? Who is there?

## Change: Steps Toward Progress

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As people learn and develop a deeper understanding of structural racism in the U.S., it can often trigger a defensive response. Argumentation, silence and withdrawal are just some of the ways a person might respond out of anger or fear. In order to start a conversation on this difficult topic, and maintain the conversation to productive end, consider the five strategies below.

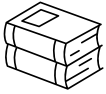
### How to break through and engage in conversation

- **Extend an invitation.** One strategy to start a conversation with someone after they've made a racist comment is ask people if they're open to hearing your thoughts before jumping into a conversation about race and racism. If they say 'no,' then your words wouldn't have landed right with them anyway. If they're open to listening, then you've established a path forward.
- **Normalize the topic in your sphere of influence.** You can bring up the topic with family, friends and colleagues to practice the dialogue and eliminate the feeling of it being taboo.
- **Build bridges.** Another strategy to confronting someone who has prejudiced beliefs is asking them for their reasoning and feelings behind their stance, and then listening to them as they explain. Giving the person time to explain can help reveal why they hold certain beliefs and might allow you to respond with "I used to think that way," or, "I know many people feel that way," but then explain how you've changed, advanced or witnessed others change. Meet them where they are and show them there is a path forward for deeper understanding.
- **Be willing to listen.** When a white person engages in conversation about racism with a person of color, it's important for the white person to listen with curiosity and gratitude.
- **Establish a common goal.** If we want to live in a peaceful society, where everyone is able to thrive, we all have to be working toward that goal together. If this common goal is actually shared by everyone in the conversation, then, although a direct path may not be clear, the destination provides motivation to find a better way.

Challenging conversations around race and racism take patience and intentionality. As you and others learn and develop, take time to let the deeper understanding sink in. And continue to move forward with more patience and more intentionality.

# Learn More

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- “White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Race” by Robin DiAngelo, <https://www.robindiangelo.com/>
- “Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race” by Debby Irving, <https://www.debbyirving.com/the-book/>
- “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race” by Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum, <https://www.beverlydanieltatum.com/>
- “21-Day Racial Equity Habit Building Challenge” by Debby Irving and Dr. Eddie Moore, <https://www.eddiemoorej.com/21daychallenge>
- “Resources for Talking About Race, Racism and Racialized Violence with Kids,” Center for Racial Justice in Education, <https://centerracialjustice.org/resources/resources-for-talking-about-race-racism-and-racialized-violence-with-kids/>

## Sources:

“Why Is It So Hard for White People to Talk about Race?,” BU Today, <http://www.bu.edu/articles/2019/white-fragility/>

“Review: Why is it so hard for white people to talk about racism?,” America Magazine, <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2019/06/28/review-why-it-so-hard-white-people-talk-about-racism>

“11 Terms You Should Know to Better Understand Structural Racism,” Aspen Institute, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/structural-racism-definition/>

“A harsh wake-up: Here’s how white people can broach difficult conversations about race,” Boston Globe, <https://www.boston.com/news/local-news/2020/06/16/a-harsh-wake-up-heres-how-white-people-can-broach-difficult-conversations-about-race>



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