

Everyone benefits from being listened to about their experiences related to race and racism. Each of us, regardless of our "race", has been affected by growing up in a society permeated by racism. We all need to tell about our experiences with people of other "races"; about how we've been hurt by racism, about how we learned about injustice; about when we've been scared, sad, angry, confused, etc. Below is a description of a dependable approach to exchanging support so everyone can be listened to and recover from the effects of racism.

HOW TO BEGIN SUPPORT LISTENING EXCHANGES FOR ENDING RACISM:

Support Listening Exchanges can be used by adults and young people for freeing themselves from the effects of racism and other oppressions. While these listening exchanges are effective in addressing the full range of oppressions and other experiences of mistreatment and/or emotional hurt, this handout focuses on addressing issues of race and racism. Both people who have been the targets of racism and white people have found this method to be effective.

This is an approach to healing the damage that has been done to individuals by racism. In addition to doing this individual work, we must also change oppressive policies, practices, and institutions. Removing the damage done to us as individuals enables us to be more effective in taking action against racism and other forms of injustice in institutions and at all levels of society.

Taking Turns

A Support Listening Exchange, or "session", consists of two people taking turns listening to each other. It's simple to get started. It just takes two people. Find a friend (or co-worker or spouse) who will try it with you. Agree that you will take turns listening to each other without interruption for an equal amount of time, and agree how long that time will be. Then decide who is going to talk first. That person talks about whatever he or she wants to talk about. The listener simply pays attention, tries to understand fully, and doesn't interrupt to give advice or comment or tell how he or she feels about what is said.

After the agreed upon time, the talker (who might be thought of as the "talker/thinker/feeler") becomes the listener, and the one who listened first now talks about anything he or she wants to talk about. It is important to agree that whatever is said by either person will not be repeated by the listener outside of the session. This makes it safe to talk more fully. The whole process becomes more effective the more you use it. Support Listening sessions can be as long or short as you have time for. Even a few minutes shared can make a big difference in how you are able to think and function, and two hours shared is even better.

How Has Racism Affected Your Life?

Being listened to with caring and respect as we tell the stories of how racism has affected our lives begins the healing process. The talker in a session may choose to respond to questions such as: "How has racism affected your life?" "What are your earliest memories of being aware that there are people whose skin is a different color from yours?" "What are your earliest memories of being aware that people are mistreated based on the color of their skin?" "What was good about growing up the 'race' you are?" "What was difficult about growing up the 'race' you are?" "How does it make you feel to witness (or be aware of) racism?" "When have you stood up against racism?" "When did you participate in or not interrupt racism?" Or the talker may want to simply follow his or her mind wherever it goes when being listened to on the topic of race and racism. Or the talker may tell his or her life story from the perspective of being targeted by racism or of being white.

Support Listening Exchanges are done primarily for the benefit of the talker. As the listener in a session, the attitude and attention you bring to the listening will make a significant difference in how safe your talker feels and how openly he or she can reflect and share. You will be most helpful if you listen with respect and delight in the person, while assuming that your talker is intelligent, powerful, and loving. Be sure to keep the focus on the talker, keeping your memories of similar experiences and your emotional reactions to yourself. Don't try to analyze, "psychologize", or give advice. Communicate a relaxed confidence in the talker, in yourself, and in the importance of the listening exchange.

Sometimes the person talking may begin to laugh or cry or get angry, or sometimes tremble or yawn. These forms of emotional release are a natural human process for healing emotional hurts. Both for people targeted by racism and for white people, healing fully from racism involves releasing the emotional

tensions left from early hurtful experiences in our lives. While this display of emotion may initially make you uncomfortable, it is actually a sign of progress. It simply means that the person is feeling some embarrassment, grief, rage, or fear and is becoming “un-embarrassed”, “un-sad”, “un-afraid”, or is healing the anger. The person listening can feel pleased if this happens and should continue to pay attention to the talker without trying to stop any emotional release, or “discharge”, that is happening.

When we are allowed and encouraged to tell fully the stories of how racism has affected us, with others listening and giving their full attention, we will begin to heal. When we are able not only to recount the facts of these stories, but also to allow ourselves to feel and show what it was like personally – feel and express the rage, grief, or terror – we become increasingly free of the damage of racism. All of the emotional effects of racism can be healed, if the person is given enough time, attention and understanding.

Support Groups

It also works well to get a small group of people together to take turns listening to each other. Each person in such a support group gets an equal amount of time to talk and/or “discharge” while the rest of the group listens. One person acts as leader of the group to help the group decide how much time each person will get, who will go first, and so on. The leader can also actively support each member to speak, in turn, and encourage the release of painful emotions. The leader can also help remind the group about the importance of confidentiality; assist the group to schedule its next meeting, etc.

About eight people seems to be the optimum size for a group, but they can function well both smaller and larger. Groups can meet as often or as many times as the group members wish. Support groups are a good structure for people from a similar background to use to talk about what they like about being from that background, what has been hard about it, what they wish other people understood, etc. When each person has had his or her turn to be listened to, you can end the meeting with each person getting a chance to say what he or she liked best about being in the group meeting or something he or she is looking forward to.

How to Use Your Turn in a Listening Exchange or Support Group

You can start your turn by telling your listener about good things, big or small, that have happened lately. It could be a beautiful sunset you saw, meeting a friend, or solving a problem. The idea is to give yourself a chance to notice the things that are going well. This is particularly important if you feel discouraged. Painful feelings often pull at our attention and make it more difficult to think and function.

A listening exchange or “session” is a good place to talk about recent events that have been upsetting. Often you will find that being listened to about them, without someone trying to give you advice, allows you to get a better perspective on them. Often you can think of a good solution, if you just have someone hear you out and show confidence in you while you feel upset and talk about the problem. It can also be useful to ask yourself what earlier experience this reminds you of, or when you felt this way before. You will almost always think of some situation from the past that was hurtful or upsetting in a similar way. Talking about it and/or releasing painful emotions can remove the burden of it.

Sessions can also be used for telling your life story, appreciating yourself, reviewing successes, or setting goals. In general, because of the power dynamics of racism, it works better for white people to be listened to by other white people when they are talking about their upsets and feelings related to race. (Exceptions can be made if a person of color chooses to be the listener.) It has proven workable for people of color to be listened to by either other people of color or by white people. At the end of a session, especially if you have been talking about something difficult for you, take a few moments to re-direct your thoughts to something you are looking forward to, or some simple subject you don't feel tense about, such as favorite foods, scenery, etc.

“Support Listening” has been developed from Re-evaluation Counseling (RC), a more thorough approach to recovering from the effects of racism. See www.rc.org for information about RC. More suggested topics for Support Listening Exchanges can be found on <http://www.coming-together.org> in “Break the Silence – Conversations You Can Initiate”.

Questions may be addressed to Russ Vernon-Jones, Amherst, MA, at russvj@gmail.com