

We All Have Feelings About Race and Racism

Racism is an emotional topic. We all have feelings about it. We have feelings about the way racism continues in the world today. We have feelings about racism in history. We have feelings about the effects of racism on people we care about, and on us. We have feelings about other people's denial and blindness to racism; about those who actively perpetrate racism; and about those who collude with it or act it out unawaresly. We have feelings about the fact that we haven't been able to do more to end it. People of color and white people all have feelings about racism.

In addition to having feelings about racism and its effects, the racism we've internalized is rooted in feelings. This is true of the racism internalized by white people and of the racism internalized by people of color. Racism is not simply misinformation that is easily corrected by getting accurate information. If that were the essence of racism, we would have eliminated it years ago. Racism has persisted, even among well-intentioned people, because it is so rooted in emotions.

The attitudes, tones, and confusions of racism always "piggyback" on other hurts that have happened to us. Each of us, starting when we are very young, has experiences of fear, of aloneness, of loss, of being powerless, of being misunderstood, and of doubting ourselves. Even with the most loving care-takers and best situations we inevitably have these experiences. The painful emotions sit inside us and are easily triggered by even small events. When we first encounter racism, whether we are targeted by it, witness it, or are expected to act it out, it is frightening to us. It triggers earlier painful emotions and attaches to them. In such experiences our ability to think clearly is impaired and we are vulnerable to taking in the false and harmful perspectives of racism.

For children of color, their fears have propped the door open for the racist tones, words, and stereotypes to enter their minds and sit there ready to affect how they think about themselves and their people. When they feel upset, separate, afraid, or angry, those feelings become more believable and can affect their perspectives, attitudes and behavior.

For white children, their fears have also made their minds vulnerable to adopting the racist tones, words and stereotypes. They attach to fears and feelings of separation and powerlessness and sit in their minds ready to affect how they see people of color. When the white child feels separate, scared, or disconnected, he or she is likely to try to escape those feelings by acting out the oppressor role he or she has been frightened by. The feelings, and the desire to escape them, existed before racism was witnessed, but the experience gives those feelings a racial twist.

Racism is all around us – in the messages of TV programs, in other entertainment, and in books; in the way the news is reported; in stereotypes; in the racial segregation of most families' social lives; in the lack of correct information; and in the way people treat each other, the things they say; and more. Over time,

repeated experiences of racism can form our early feelings into chronic feelings of internalized inferiority or internalized superiority that may be easily triggered, may affect us unconsciously, and may linger in our minds despite our valiant efforts to reject and eradicate them. Even if they are not chronic (i.e. if we do not feel them or enact them all the time) we likely carry a vulnerability to having these feelings surface in our minds or in our behavior in situations of stress or upset.

All racism, both blatant and subtle, is rooted in emotions. Emotions are not logical. This explains why those who enact racism quite explicitly often seem particularly irrational in their views. This also explains why many decades of efforts to simply “unlearn” racism have had only very limited effectiveness. People of all racial backgrounds can, and have, made significant progress in stepping out of racism through learning more accurate information, and on the basis of decision. However, when people can intentionally access and unload the feelings underlying racism, greater progress is made and efforts to eliminate racism are more sustainable.

How do we address the feelings underlying racism? First, regardless of our racial background, we must acknowledge that we have feelings and look for safe opportunities to feel them. Some of us find these opportunities in movies, books, and music. Second, we all need to be listened to about our experiences and our feelings related to race. It makes sense to create opportunities to be listened to and to listen to others. We can intentionally set up such opportunities in paired listening exchanges and in small groups. It’s particularly useful to provide these and to participate in them after experiencing a movie, a talk, a reading, etc. that may bring some feelings closer to the surface.

Third, the greatest relief and healing from any painful emotion occurs when we can cry, laugh, tremble, or rage. Our society tends to try to shut down these natural expressions of strong emotions. These are, however, the natural ways that humans heal from emotional hurts. We can learn to accept and welcome these healing processes in ourselves and in others. A mother of a young white child recently told me that when her daughter learned that Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed many years ago, the daughter burst into tears. This is a natural and healthy reaction. We would undoubtedly all be healthier and more free of the effects of racism, if we could all burst into tears when we learn or remember what racism has done and continues to do.

Feelings about race and racism can seem risky or dangerous. They may have the capacity to make us explode, to sink us, or to overwhelm us. If we show feelings in the wrong place or in the wrong way, we may suffer harmful consequences. We may experience them as being right on the surface, or we may feel they are inaccessible. For many of us, learning “not to go there” has been an important survival skill. We have rarely had safe places to even talk about these feelings, much less feel them and let them out. We may fear that we will lose other people and be less connected to others, if we show these feelings. All of us have had negative

experiences, whether as a child or more recently, when we tried to show, or unload, painful emotions. Yet we all need to do exactly that – feel, show, and unload our painful feelings that are connected to race and/or racism.

We know that people don't choose their feelings. The feelings that we have, and the feelings that others have, result from what has happened to us. The totality of our experiences leads each of us to feel whatever it is that we feel. Feelings are a natural human response to our experiences. This is true of newborn babies, of seniors, and of everyone in between. Therefore, we are not to blame for any of our feelings, but we are responsible for what we do with them.

When we can grieve, or laugh, or rage, or tremble, the burdens of the past and of painful emotions are lightened. Our natural love, thoughtfulness, intelligence, and desire to connect and to persist as advocates for racial justice are freed up, and our energy for living is renewed.

While it can be very valuable to be able to feel and unload painful emotions, none of us want to be mired in those feelings as we go about our day to day lives. We want to be able to pay attention to the feelings we need to heal, but we also want to get our attention away from painful feelings when we have other things to deal with. In getting our attention out of the painful feelings it can be helpful to notice that we are not alone in having feelings, that there are people who care about us, and people who are also working to help dismantle racism. We can intentionally direct our attention to what is good and loving and hopeful in the world.

Let's try to create safe spaces for each other in which we can remember what's happened to us related to race and racism; in which we can feel the feelings that go with those memories and the feelings we have today; and in which we can back each other to heal fully and become active together in helping to end racism.

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