

How Can I Do Something About Racism?

20 Small Steps for White People (Which Are Surprisingly Difficult to Take)

If there are action campaigns or initiatives that are led by or endorsed by people of color, get involved and support them right away. If these are not immediately available to you, or even if they are, it makes sense use the 20 steps below (perhaps in the order they are presented) to develop yourself and people around you into more knowledgeable and effective anti-racists. As Michelle Alexander says, we need a large movement for racial justice, but before we can have a movement we need an Awakening. Be part of that Awakening now, in yourself, and in the people around you.

Identify a white ally for yourself

Find at least one white person with whom you can talk regularly about race and racism. White people are often pulled to try to do this work alone. Get a white partner or small group. Tell each other some of the experiences and feelings you've had in your life related to race.

Learn more about race and racism

Learn through reading, seeing videos, and talking with people. The website at www.coming-together.org is one good place to start. White people have been consistently given misinformation and denied information about what's actually happening with regard to race, especially in the current era. The truth may be surprising; it may be upsetting; but being well informed makes a difference.

Keep talking with your white ally about each thing you learn or experience

You will have thoughts and feelings about the things you learn. Be sure to talk with your white ally or group about each of them. Racism seems to make it difficult for white people to remember what they've learned related to race. Talking about it helps you and the people who listen to you.

Notice your feelings, feel them, and share them

Race is an emotional topic. Most white people experience feelings of fear, grief, awkwardness, shame, rage, embarrassment, timidity, and/or isolation. We have feelings about people of color, about what happens to them, about ourselves and about other white people. If we try to address this only at the cognitive level, we will not reach our goals. Tell your white ally or group about your feelings about each experience related to race that you've had in the past, or have now that you are pursuing this. If you can find situations in which you are safe enough to cry, laugh, rage, or tremble, this will give you greater flexibility and free you from some of the weight of the feelings.

Notice the effects of racism on you as a white person

We often think of racism in terms of its effect on people of color. While they are not comparable to the horrible effects on people of color, racism has major effects on white people as well. It is important for each white person to learn to recognize and notice both the ways that the system of racism benefits him or her, and the ways in

which that that system dehumanizes white people and results in costs to white people. White people experience very significant material benefits and psychological advantages from the system, which are denied to people of color. However, white people would have better access to their full humanness, be better connected to other humans, and have better lives overall, if wealth, power, and respect were more equally distributed and racism did not exist. The position of supremacy is inherently dehumanizing to white people, in addition to the terrible effects it has on people of color. Notice where racism benefits you and where it may be making you more fearful, awkward, or upset; where it leaves you feeling like you don't belong with people of color or don't get to have them in your life; where it leaves you less hopeful or powerful about having the world you want. Talk with your white ally about the many effects of racism on you.

Notice race everywhere – Don't be colorblind

Notice race everywhere you can. Notice which people of color are present, if any, and what groups are not represented. Notice how race does or doesn't show up in the media, in meetings, and in personal interactions. Many of us have been taught that we are supposed to be colorblind. This is bad idea that helps maintain the inequitable status quo and interferes with moving toward racial justice. If we don't notice race, we can't notice, or do anything about, injustice that is based on race. We do notice race, and that's fine. We can notice a person's racial identity and treat them with complete respect and humanness.

Don't get hung up in guilt

You may feel guilty about the history of racism, about your awkwardness around race, etc. It's fine to feel any feeling you have, but don't get stuck there. We all grew up surrounded by misinformation about race. Regardless of our racial background, we inevitably have absorbed stereotypes, feelings and misinformation about race. We are all captive to the system of racism and together we can work to dismantle it.

Participate in the Online Dialogue on the Coming Together website

It's good to share your thoughts and experiences related to race. The website is a safe place to do this. Periodically a new question will be posted to you to respond to. Look for other ways to share as well.

Learn a few key facts, stories, or questions that you can use in conversations

Many white people struggle to remember what they've heard about racism and struggle to find what to say when talking with skeptical white people. Having even two facts about racism that you've committed to memory and tell other people often, will help grow your confidence and skill in talking with people. Michelle Alexander's article, "Cruel and Unequal", on the Coming Together website has some useful ones. Facts which demonstrate clear racial discrimination, rather than just racially disproportionate outcomes, will be most effective with skeptical white people.

Talk to other white people about race – Break the Silence

Most white people avoid talking about race with each other. We will need to end this silence, if we want to create a sufficient Awakening to fuel a new movement for

racial justice. Bring up race, even at the risk of making a mistake or creating discomfort. Silence helps maintain the inequitable status quo. Don't feel you have to have an answer for everything another white person brings up around race or racism. Just try to get a conversation started and keep it going if you can. Be curious about what other people think about this topic even if you disagree with them. Get their minds engaged on the topic. Over time you will develop skills in responding the way you want to. For now, it's enough to get the conversation going.

Talk with your white ally about your efforts to talk to other white people

Talking with other white people about race and racism turns out to be quite challenging for most white people. Talk regularly with your white ally about your efforts to start such conversations, your successes, your failures, your frustrations, and your questions.

Make more friends of color and deepen the relationships you have

Racism tells us that we don't belong with each other, if we are of different races. Seek out opportunities to push against that. Don't ask people of color to teach you about race or racism. Don't think you need to be the "helper" in the relationship. Do this just because you like people and you realize that your life will be better for you, if you have more people of color in it.

Expect to be uncomfortable and to make mistakes

Challenging the ways racism is entrenched in our society and in all of society's institutions is often uncomfortable. Fully facing the effects that the system is having on people of color is deeply upsetting to most of us. If you are comfortable, that's likely a sign that it's time to step out further. Mistakes are part of the process. None of us can navigate these challenging waters without committing them. If you aren't making mistakes, you are almost certainly being too cautious (and thereby committing the even larger mistake of inaction). Take risks for racial justice. If you make a mistake, clean it up, but don't let it deter you from acting boldly for racial justice.

Listen to people of color

Listen to people of color. Ask them about their thinking and opinions. When you disagree, consider the possibility that they might be right. (They may not be, but it's important to give your mind a chance to go against the societal conditioning that white people know better.)

Look for opportunities to amplify the voices of people of color

People of color often have important perspectives and insights that white people are not hearing. You can help elect people of color to public office, invite them to speak to your organization, etc. Listen and then support the thinking of people of color when you can. Remember to give credit for ideas put forward by people of color to the person you heard them from, rather than just restating them and taking the credit yourself.

Learn to recognize systemic racism

Racism is not primarily individual acts of hatred, bias, or even unawareness. If we only look for and recognize individual racism, we will miss much of how racism has

operated historically and operates today. Racism is systemic in the United States. Racism is embedded in our institutions, in our culture, and in the structures of our society. It looks different than it did 40 years ago. It is often cloaked in so-called “colorblind” language. It shows up in the criminal justice system, in health care, in education, in employment, in political and economic life, and more, often without any direct individual racial bias directing it. We need to become “systemically aware” – to develop skills in noticing how systemic racism operates throughout our society and affects all of us.

Learn to recognize and interrupt racism

Develop skills of noticing when racism is being manifest both interpersonally and systemically, and speak up against it. Decide that even when you don’t know what to say, you will say something. Don’t leave it to people of color to have to name it and be the ones to point it out. It’s better to make some mistakes here than to remain silent. You will learn from your mistakes. You rarely learn anything by remaining silent.

Notice when resources are flowing disproportionately toward white people and seek to redirect them

Racism generally results in money, opportunity, inclusion, time, and status flowing disproportionately toward white people rather than toward people of color. Notice when this happens and seek to counter it. Whether it is the resources of an institution, a small group, or your own, seek to direct more of them toward people of color. Help make more resources available to the work of dismantling racism.

Develop an awareness of how racism is intertwined with class, gender, sexuality, religious oppression, etc.

The intersections of all oppressions are part of the societal system within which we all operate. Racism operates through many forms of difference and power, and visa versa. Racism helps keep other oppressions in place. We get to oppose any form or humans harming humans.

Accept that this is life-long work

Just working on ourselves – to become aware, effective, connected - is ongoing life-long work. It’s not enough for us to become non-racist (avoiding committing acts of personal racism); to be effective promoters of justice, we must become pro-actively anti-racist. There is no destination at which we as individuals can arrive. There is only the joy and the struggle of the journey together as we make our community and our society places where the humanity of every individual is fully respected, valued, and welcomed.

We invite people of all racial backgrounds to use the www.coming-together.org website to send your ideas for other steps you would recommend, and to share stories of your efforts to take these steps, and others, to stand against racism.