

Embodying Hope



Rock the Boat About Racism

Heartbreakingly, Covid-19 is infecting and killing a much higher percentage of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) than white people due to the inequities of past and present racism.*† Early in the pandemic, Black men were afraid to wear masks because their covered faces might be seen as more threatening.‡ In the US, the lack of universal healthcare and atrocious Covid-19 response are direct results of racism.

Notice your inner responses as you read about racism and white supremacy. Do you feel numb and bored? Do you feel angry and defensive? Do you feel relief because someone is naming your experience? When you pause with strong feelings and give them some space inside, you increase your capacity to acknowledge and disrupt racism.

* “Black People Are Dying From COVID-19 at Higher Rates Because Racism Is a Preexisting Condition” by Edwin Rios, Mother Jones, April 9, 2020. <https://motherjones.com/coronavirus-updates/2020/04/black-people-are-dying-from-covid-19-at-higher-rates-because-racism-is-a-pre-existing-condition/>

† “Covid-19’s stunningly unequal death toll in America, in one chart” by Dylan Scott and Christina Animashaun, Vox, Oct 2, 2020. <https://vox.com/coronavirus-covid19/2020/10/2/21496884/us-covid-19-deaths-by-race-black-white-americans>

‡ “For Black Men, Fear That Masks Will Invite Racial Profiling” by Derrick Bryson Taylor, New York Times, April 14, 2020. <https://nytimes.com/2020/04/14/us/coronavirus-masks-racism-african-americans.html>

White supremacy thrives in the background, unseen and unacknowledged. It wants to be “the way things are,” unnoticed, unquestioned, unresisted. While we associate white supremacy with Nazis and overt fascism, it is also the pernicious, pervasive idea that white people are more important and deserving than everyone else. Note that whiteness can be conditional, since light-skinned Jews are currently considered white, but can quickly become the targets of white supremacy.

We can resist white supremacy by seeing it and speaking about it. BIPOC parents teach their children to name and navigate racism that threatens their lives. White children have the privilege of remaining oblivious. Many white parents teach their children to avoid mentioning race in order not to “rock the boat.”

We see the impact of white supremacy when white people are the ones promoted and elected to positions of power. We see it when white people are welcomed in stores while Black people are treated with suspicion. We see it when Black neighborhoods are first denied mortgages and then razed for freeways, ball parks, and hospitals, like Portland’s Albina neighborhood.*

We see it in our books, TV shows, movies, and video games, where the viewpoint characters are white by default. Even if they are not, we often assume they are, especially when book covers are white-washed rather than showcasing characters with dark skin. In media, we see Black people depicted as villains, criminals, or support characters, rather than seeing them centered in their own lives.

* The Racist History of Portland, the Whitest City in America by Alana Semuels, *The Atlantic*, July 22, 2016. <https://theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/07/racist-history-portland/492035/>

We see white supremacy inside us when it seems revolutionary to say that Black Lives Matter. In a just society, it would be obvious that every Black person's life is significant. Every Black person deserves protection, care, ease, and delight. No one deserves the ongoing trauma and destruction inflicted by racism.

There is potent shame pent up in the mechanics of white supremacy. Shame at the history of terrible acts, large and small, that have in stalled and maintained it. Shame at being numb to the suffering it requires. Shame at having an unfair advantage and not wanting to give it up. Shame at being made to feel less-than, and silenced about it.

The shame is passed down from adult to child, silencing questions and protests of unfairness. White people react wildly to being told something they said was racist, as if being called racist is worse than behaving in racist ways.

We can respond compassionately to that shame by thinking of it as white supremacy acting through us, rather than tainting us. Our goal is to help ourselves and others stop being unwitting channels for its evil.

Tolerate discomfort. Rhonda V. Magee, a Black professor of law at University of San Francisco, offers gentle mindfulness techniques to strengthen our capacity to tolerate shame and other uncomfortable emotions.* As we develop a practice of turning toward our emotions, we can let them flow through us rather than flood us, which gives us room to empathize with people around us.

BIPOC can use mindfulness to deflect the ongoing harm from microaggressions and choose how to respond. Magee recommends responding with kindness and empathy. Anger

* *The Inner Work of Racial Justice*, TarcherPerigee, 2019, by Rhonda V. Magee.

is also an option, even though white supremacy says it is not allowed. First bring compassion to the person being harmed, and then to the person causing harm.

A microaggression is a reminder about white supremacy, seemingly minor, but still hurtful, especially with repetition. Assuming a Black person on campus is a janitor rather than a professor. Asking a person with mixed ethnicity, “What *are* you?” Flinching away from a Black person in the elevator.

White people can start with willingness to be uncomfortable while learning about racism and becoming aware of internalized biased assumptions. Mindfulness creates a pause to prevent biases from spilling out to become microaggressions, or a pause for an apology afterward.

For example, a person of mixed race might respond angrily to being asked where they are from, because they get asked all the time and they have lived here all their life. A mindful pause allows the person who asked to respond with empathy rather than defensiveness.

Personal affirmative action. When white people do favors and extend help to other white people by unconscious default, BIPOC continue to be at a disadvantage. White people can commit to personal affirmative action and make a conscious effort to be kind to people with less privilege, not as a rescuer, but as a fellow human being.

Talk about racism. While Black people have to talk about racism to navigate daily life, white people generally avoid the topic. Perhaps you already discuss racism with like-minded people. When protests are in the news, perhaps you remind people that lives are more important than property.

As a white person, whatever your current level of engagement, think about how you can take one more step. Mention anti-racist books and articles you are reading. Ask others

what they are learning. Use the communication skills you already have to listen and understand others' viewpoints and share yours.

Be mindful around your sense of danger while discussing racism. Test it out with small risks. Notice white supremacy in action, warning you to stay quiet to keep its benefits. Notice when your words are well-received. Notice when you are encountering a wall.

While taking one step past your usual comfort zone, do not abandon your sense of what is too much for you. You can withdraw from conversations that become cruel or overwhelming and return to the topic another day. Talking about racism is a skill that develops over time.

Look back kindly. As you learn more about anti-racism, look back kindly on your past self. When past missteps come to mind, breathe through the shame of having behaved in racist ways, and be glad you are learning and growing. Bring that open-hearted kindness to the people around you as well.

White supremacy is a catastrophe for everyone. While BIPOC are affected more directly and urgently, the numbness and disconnection of white supremacy are terrible for white people too. The collective disaster of climate change is made worse by white supremacy's callous lack of care for people of color.

White people: for yourself and for all of us, gently gather your courage, step forward, and talk about racism.