

The Role of White People in Ending Racism

RACISM IS CONTRARY TO THE FUNDAMENTAL NATURE OF EVERY HUMAN BEING. All human beings begin life caring deeply about all other human beings. Until we ourselves are hurt—put down, ignored, threatened, beaten, criticized, isolated, and so on—each of us wants all people to be treated well. None of us, including white people, would ever participate in the racist mistreatment or oppression of other humans unless we had first been hurt. However, once hurt, we are vulnerable to hurting others—by participating in oppressive systems and acting oppressively as individuals.

In an oppressive society, few people escape being hurt in ways that leave us feeling scared and bad about ourselves. It is when we are scared or when we feel bad about ourselves that we are most vulnerable to believing racist messages.

In a racist society there is a constant barrage of racist messages and practices—from family, friends, acquaintances, schools, the media, and many other institutions. No one can grow up in such an environment and escape its effects. In this way the society installs racism on every white person. It does so regardless of how strongly or for how long we actively resist.

WHITE PEOPLE ACT AS AGENTS OF RACISM

As a result of these hurts, all white people have been conditioned to accept the lies of racism and to carry racist feelings. Some white people stop questioning these feelings and act out these “beliefs” in hateful and oppressive ways. Other white people intellectually reject the content of racist messages and try to treat people targeted by racism respectfully and as equals. But even when those of us who are white act with goodwill toward people targeted by racism or actively engage in fighting racism, attitudes connected with racism (unjustified fears, the seeking of approval, feelings of superiority, etc.) surface from time to time and must be battled in order for us to act consistently according to our best thinking.

We white people are pulled to act on the basis of the racism we’ve heard and seen, acting sometimes subtly and unawares and other times overtly and harshly.

RACISM HURTS WHITE PEOPLE

Racism greatly damages the lives of people targeted by it. Racism also hurts those of us who are white. (This is true of any group that acts out oppression at another group.) This is far from the damage inflicted on the targets of racism, but it corrupts our humanity and compounds the ways we already feel bad about ourselves. Not standing up against racism erodes our integrity and undermines our sense of goodness and self-worth.

White people become separated from the majority of the world’s people, know little about them, and miss close involvement in the lives of a rich variety of people. Racism also erodes relationships between white people—we do not want to be associated with “that white racist” or “that white liberal.” Racism leaves us feeling hopeless about actually eliminating racism and creating a just and equitable society.

WHITE PEOPLE ENDING RACISM AND HEALING FROM THE HURTS OF WHITE RACISM

United to End Racism and Re-evaluation Counseling have valuable experience and tools for white people to use in ending racism. We have learned that any and all “oppressor roles” (the role played by a person who has been conditioned to be an agent of oppression) are installed by hurting people very deeply. White people’s oppressive behavior arises from deep emotional damage. Sustained emotional work is therefore required for those of us who are white people to free ourselves from racism. To create a just society, white people must not only inform ourselves fully about racism and take action to end it, but must also heal from the damage caused by being exposed to racism and by having participated in it.

United to End Racism has found that white people taking turns listening to each other in pairs and in groups is an effective way to do this emotional work. Those of us who are white need to remember and to tell our stories about the racism in our lives and assist one another to release the intense feelings that underlie these stories. These stories can include early experiences with racism, the racist lies we were told, the times we acted out racism, and the

racist attitudes that were held by the people around us, as well as the successes we've had in fighting racism.

To do this work, we white people need settings in which we can be open about racism without being blamed or shamed, where we know we are cared about and respected. Under these conditions, we can remember and tell what happened to us with regard to racism and release the painful emotions from these experiences. And we need to learn to do this work with one another as white people. It is the job of white people, not people targeted by racism, to do the work to both stop white people from perpetuating racism and to help white people heal the damage we carry.

With emotional release, white people are able to think afresh about these experiences. We become partners with people targeted by racism in their efforts to heal from having lived in a racist society. We begin taking effective steps to end racism along with freeing ourselves of the effects of racism, all of which improves our lives in countless ways.

WHITE PEOPLE AS ALLIES TO PEOPLE TARGETED BY RACISM

An important part of ending racism and all other oppressions is to develop alliances between those targeted by the oppression and those outside the targeted group. Eliminating racism requires the development of strong alliances among groups of people targeted by racism and also with white people who are committed to ending racism. These white allies are people who have decided to work for the liberation of all people targeted by racism. We, white people in this ally role, demonstrate by our actions and words that we support the goals and visions of groups targeted by racism and work alongside them. In *United to End Racism*, we have learned a great deal about building these alliances and about white people becoming effective allies.

STEPS TOWARD BECOMING WHITE ALLIES

There are many ways for white people to work as allies in eliminating racism. Some of these include:

- Taking visible stands against all forms of racism by both backing anti-racism organizations led by people targeted by racism as well as standing independently as a white person against racism
- Working on and eliminating our own racism and healing the places we have been silent and passive about racism
- Standing against one of the effects of racism by reminding targeted people of their goodness, intelligence, competence, and the importance of their relationships with one another
- Actively seeking correct information and healing from the ways we have been unaware and uninformed
- Building long-term friendships with people targeted by racism and challenging the racist messages of separation, difference, and fear
- Training and building groups of white allies committed to eliminating racism by assisting other whites to heal the damage done to us by racism
- Understanding that being allies to people targeted by racism is for our own benefit since it involves reclaiming our full humanity and having a world right for everyone, a world where everyone matters

For more information about white people healing the damage done by racism, see the pamphlet *Working Together to End Racism*, a publication of United to End Racism.

United to End Racism

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