



ASK AMANDA

Dear Amanda,

Sometimes, I find it difficult to effectively confront systemic racism in my social group, work setting, household, and other areas of my life. How can I confront systemic racism in an approachable way that doesn't cause others to shut down and perhaps sparks a desire to get involved in activism against systemic racism as well? .

Dear Member,

It is our responsibility in our communities to educate our families, friends, and partners and to challenge the racism around us. The problem is that taking on these topics leads to a sense of isolation in many whites who don't find supportive communities or friendships that they can turn to while they are engaging the people closest to them. From my experience, it certainly changed the roles of people in my life and opened the door to new connections that I value deeply. To speak to this question, I have some suggestions for how to focus on your growth and engage with other people.

Focus on your own learning and action you want to take

There is work you need to do before you start engaging in challenging racial dialogues and confronting the racism around you¹. It is most important that you focus on your own growth and learning before you can start educating others. Without a firm foundation of knowledge of racial justice issues and skills for how to have these conversations, you can end up alienating people who are genuinely trying to learn or allowing insults to people of color in an effort to seem neutral. Get involved in groups that are trying to institute change. Go to a training or take a class. These spaces are vital to learning about the history and current issues with racism, and they will also connect you to people who are doing the same thing.

Set boundaries

Communicate boundaries to the people around you about what you will and will not tolerate. You may or may not change them, but you can tell them that you don't like where a conversation is going, you don't like the way they are talking about a group or person, or why what they are doing is racist. Some racist behaviors are unconscious, but many people knowingly say things that are racist or engage in racist behaviors. If you have pointed out racist slurs, speech, or ideas and the person is not receptive, you can assume they are invested in their behavior and you should probably remove yourself from the situation. Some of our relationships are voluntary and others are foundational to our lives. If these relationships are important or not one you can remove yourself from, hold your boundaries and let the person know how their behavior is impacting your relationship with them. They might not care about the big picture, but if they care about you, they may at least monitor some of their behavior around you.

Some things cannot wait. As I write this, many are still reeling from another mass murder in Buffalo that took the lives of 10 people that was motivated by racial hatred². For me, it is hard not to be angry at the many failings in our families, schools, and institutions to specifically address racial hatred and work to end racial violence. It is vital that we familiarize ourselves with extremist rhetoric and how it is showing up in the mainstream. For example, the murderer in Buffalo was motivated by

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the “replacement theory,” an antisemitic and white supremacist belief that there will be a “white genocide” and whites will be replaced by people of color³. It is not harmless, and you need to have your ears open around friends and family for these arguments. Learn about how you can talk to people who are invested in racist conspiracy theories. For suggested reading, visit the Equity in Justice Resource Library at www.sbnm.org/eij.

Find Common Ground and Acknowledge Shared Experiences

If you are in the same family or went to the same schools, you probably got similar messages about who you are in relation to who others are. If you are choosing to learn more about racism, acknowledge what led you there. Why are you pulling away from the pack and what experiences, understandings, and realizations have you had that are different from the people around you? Why are they interpreting their lives and social position so differently from you? Are they afraid to learn something different because it could cause distance between themselves and others? Were they raised not to question? If you are attempting to educate, you have to find common ground and center compassion.

It is much more effective to be honest about the things that we used to believe or were told about people of color even though it creates a deep sense of shame. If we pretend that we really don't know why our peers believe what they believe, we will not show up authentically enough to delve into these topics. We will be too busy denying we ever participated in the problem, and it is a lost opportunity to build on common experiences even if you have taken divergent paths. Whites must unlearn a lot. As much as we would like to distance ourselves from white people without antiracist consciousness, we can't really do that and expect society to change. Phrases like “I used to believe that too, but then I learned...” can be helpful.

Humiliation, shaming, condescension, or treating people like they cannot learn are never effective tools for social change. You can confront and demand accountability without compromising the dignity of others. I say this because when I first began this work, I participated in the behaviors I just listed, and I regret it. I damaged relationships and it certainly didn't make the world a more just place. Projecting all of your anger about a system that has been in place for hundreds of years onto one person is counterproductive at best and dehumanizing at its worst.

Play the long game

Keep in mind, racial justice is about dismantling racism in all its forms because of the impact it has on people of color. The stakes are high and learning how to move and organize white people is important. Educating yourself and doing inner work better prepares you for the long haul of taking on these issues with people in your life. You never know when someone will have a realization and want to join you. Leave the door open so they can.

***Dr. Amanda Parker** is the new Equity in Justice Manager at the State Bar of New Mexico. To submit a question to Ask Amanda or find out more about the program go to www.sbnm.org/eij.*

Endnotes

¹ Winters, Mary (2020) Inclusive Conversations: Fostering Equity, Empathy, and Belonging Across Differences. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. Oakland, CA 94612.

² <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/16/1099034094/what-is-the-great-replacement-theory>

³ Lavin, Talia (2020) Culture Warlords: My Journey into the Dark Web of White Supremacy. Hatchett, New York, NY.