

Tips for Talking about Race



Understand your purpose for the conversation. Before you dive into a discussion about a heated, personal, and complex issue such as race, it is a good idea to be clear about what you are trying to accomplish. Are you trying to learn something about the other person? Are you trying to convince them of your perspective? Are you trying to improve your relationship? Are you trying to deal with some problems that have already arisen? Do you assume that you share a common experience and you want to connect with the other person around that experience? Do you simply want to unload some pent up emotions and be heard? Being clear with yourself and the other person upfront can help set the tone and guide the conversation.

Acknowledge the fears / concerns upfront. There are many reasons why people avoid talking about race, particularly with people who are of a different racial identity. For example, people in the dominant group (White) may fear unintentionally saying something that is offensive and then being called a racist. People in minoritized racial groups may fear having their viewpoints discounted by people in the dominant group. By acknowledging these fears/concerns up front, you can agree ahead of time on ways to lessen these fears (i.e. agree to avoid calling someone racist or ignorant, agree to validate someone's experience rather than find reasons to discount it, agree to follow the communication guidelines listed below).



Avoid assumptions. If you are talking about race with people who you perceive to be of the same racial group, do not assume that they share your experience or perspective. If you are talking to people who you perceive to be of a different racial group, do not assume that they do not or cannot relate.



Understand how race and class impact experience. People of color from economically advantaged families may not have experienced economic disparities and hardships, yet may still share the experience of being targeted, discriminated against, and subjected to various microaggressions. White people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may have experienced oppression and discrimination based on their socioeconomic status, yet they do not share the same experience with race-based discrimination as people of color. In other words, the ways that race and socioeconomic class intersect and impact our lived experiences are very complex. Therefore, in conversations about race, it is important to consider how socio-economic background impacts one's own and others' experiences and perspectives.

Be open to learning about others' viewpoints. The goal of dialogue isn't winning a debate or persuading others. It's about learning to see someone else's viewpoint and better understanding your own. It's about learning, not winning.

Understand that individual experience and group experience may differ. An individual woman, for example, may not have experienced sex discrimination in the workplace, but that does not mean that sex discrimination does not exist. It is counter-productive to point to counter-examples to try to discount generalized claims of group experience.

Be mindful of your own assumptions, thoughts, and emotions. Being able to identify them as they arise during a discussion can help you avoid misunderstandings and prevent explosions or shutdowns. It's also important to be aware of your personal connection to the issue and understand that others may have different or no perceived personal connection to the topic. Regardless of our experiences, we can still use the conversation as an opportunity to learn about others—and those who don't initially perceive a connection to an issue may come away with new insight into how that issue affects them.

Practice active listening. Listening is an essential component of any successful dialogue—particularly when difficult or emotionally-charged issues are being discussed. Good listeners focus on understanding the other person's viewpoint rather than on planning their response. When the person has finished, paraphrase what they said to make sure you understand their intent.

"If I understand you correctly..."

"I may be wrong, but what I'm hearing is that..."

"Please correct me if I misinterpret what you've said. It sounded to me that..."

"I heard you say... Is this what you meant?"

Avoid guilt and blame. We are all born and socialized into a society that we did not create. Therefore, it is not reasonable or productive to feel guilty or to blame others. At the same time, we all have a responsibility to work towards making things better for everyone. By acknowledging responsibility without guilt or blame, we can put our energies in a more productive direction.

Avoid dismissing or minimizing someone else's experience as irrelevant or untrue. Recognize that multiple perceptions and experiences can co-exist and that others' experiences are just as real and valid as your own.

Accept and affirm each other's perspectives. You can never know what it is like to walk in someone else's shoes. Even after extensive dialogue, you may not fully understand or agree with another person's experience or perspective. However, if you have listened carefully and tried to understand, you should at least be able to (a) accept how/why the other person feels as they do and (b) affirm their experience from their perspective.

Manage your emotional response. Difficult conversations often bring up strong emotions, and that's okay. Acknowledge whatever comes up for you and hang in there when something is hard to hear. This is often where learning happens. On the same note, realize that others who are discussing the situation may also be experiencing a completely different set of emotions. Allow them the opportunity to express and reflect on their emotions as well.

Use inclusive language. Try "we, although different, ..." instead of "you people." It's easy to fall into the trap of "us vs. them," but doing so usually causes others to react defensively and eventually results in an explosion or shutdown.



Bibliography

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