

So You Think You're an Anti-Racist?

Six Shifts of Consciousness for Well-Intentioned White Folks

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1. The Base Shift: Human relations programming → Racial justice action

Food fairs, multicultural festivals, and dialogue programs are fun and interesting events that may bring people together temporarily. But do they eradicate, or even mitigate, racism? The most important, and seemingly most difficult, anti-racism shift for white people is to understand that confronting racism is going to be uncomfortable, difficult, emotional, and painful. Ultimately, racial conflict is only a symptom of systemic racism, and we never will stop racism with cultural programming.

2. Racism as a People of Color problem → Racism as a White People problem

Racism is my—a white person's—pathology, not that of People of Color. Of course, it's much more comfortable for me, as a White person, to portray it is a People of Color problem so that I can sit back and wait for People of Color to solve it. How convenient, right? White people are privileged by racism, even if we aren't consciously contributing to it. Because we reap the benefits, we also must accept the responsibility to challenge the system that benefits us. I call this “spending my institutional likeability.”

3. Color-blindness → Self-examination

I don't believe color-blindness is possible. I see difference. If I can't be honest about that, I don't have much potential to be an effective anti-racist, do I? After all, if I don't see race, how can I see or respond to racism? And if color-blindness is possible, I don't believe it is desirable. Why would I want to deny what may be a meaningful aspect of somebody's identity? Instead of working on color-blindness, I might decide to direct that energy into serious self-examination so that I can be honest about my biases and how they affect the people around me and the work I'm trying to do.

4. Racism as individual acts → Racism as institutional oppression

I'm not burning any crosses. I don't own slaves. (And neither did my great-grandparents!) So this racism thing isn't my issue, right? Well, not exactly. As long as I can understand racism as individual acts of wacko White people, I can pretend that I have no part in it. But wait. I benefit from racism. It gives me access to opportunities denied to other people on the basis of race. If I understand racism in that way—as an institutional structure that provides access and opportunity to some at the expense of others—then I do have some responsibility to end it. Blast it! I knew this anti-racist stuff was going to be complicated!

5. Racial harmony → Racial equity

Why can't we all just get along? Why can't we have peace on earth? Why are “those people” so angry? I've been working on these questions all week. Here's what I've come up with: There can be no authentic peace without justice. (Consider it. If you were discriminated against regularly based on something over which you had no control, would you be feeling harmonious with your oppressor?) So if we want racial peace and harmony, all we have to do is provide racial justice. Who's ready?

6. Focus on intent → Focus on impact

Of course you don't *mean* to be racist. Neither do I. But as a White person, I'm still working on understanding racism and my own whiteness. I, too, am a product of racism. I must take responsibility for the impact I have, regardless of my intentions. Racism hurts, whether I mean it or not.