

GUIDE *to* RESPECTFUL CONVERSATIONS



The first step in speaking about race and racism, and recognizing how it plays a role in our own lives and communities, is to talk about it openly and honestly. This is, in turn, a small, but critical movement in the direction of *tikkun olam*¹ and creating a more just world. Yet, talking about racial justice, race, and racism can be challenging².

Remember that each of us has intersecting identities (race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, ability, etc.) and that we also don't always know another person's identities and experiences from their physical appearance.

People will have different reactions to the sometimes difficult conversations you'll be facilitating. Know that *being uncomfortable isn't always a bad thing*, especially if you're used to feeling comfortable and your discomfort is pushing you to grow in your empathy and solidarity. Your goal as the facilitator should be to create a space in which participants can express and listen to each other's lived experiences and where **both** their experience **and** someone else's are incorporated into a larger communal narrative.

Here are some suggestions about how to create that space.



1 | Repairing the World

2 | "Challenging" doesn't quite capture it. Speaking about race, racism, and racial justice can be joyful, harmful, liberatory, traumatic, frustrating, and agitational - sometimes all of those experiences during the course of a single dialogue- depending on who you are, who's facilitating, and who you're speaking with.

ACKNOWLEDGE THAT YOU AND OTHERS MIGHT HAVE MOMENTS OF DISCOMFORT

In many cases, it helps to say out loud what others might be feeling: "For people who don't usually talk about racial justice or speak about racism in racially diverse groups, this might make you or others feel uncomfortable, and that's OK." Demonstrating your own vulnerability can give an opportunity for others to be vulnerable.

ESTABLISH GROUP GROUND RULES

These could be formal, such as "whoever holds this spoon speaks," or "if you agree, snap your fingers." These rules could also be informal, including "whatever is said in this room, stays in this room."

USE "I" STATEMENTS

Individuals can only speak to their own experiences. Do not look to others to speak on behalf of their race, gender, ethnicity, or other groups they may identify as being a part of.

BE RESPECTFUL OF INTROVERTS - AND OF SILENCE

Notice who is not speaking. Encourage those individuals to contribute, but do not force them. Similarly, if the conversation reaches a point of silence, do not push people to speak. Be respectful of reflection and different speeds of processing.

PROVIDE SPACE FOR EVERYONE TO HAVE A VOICE

Individuals who are most comfortable expressing their opinions out loud can often dominate conversations. The facilitator should respectfully invite others to share their opinions if a few voices begin to dominate the conversation.

IF THE DISCUSSION *becomes* HEATED or UNCOMFORTABLE

AVOID "RIGHT" AND "WRONG"

While some opinions are commonly accepted as "right," it is unproductive for conversations like these to cast someone's statements or beliefs as "wrong." Instead, refer back to speaking from one's personal experience.

IF IT WILL HELP, TAKE A BREATH (OR TWO) BEFORE RESPONDING

It is critical to allow yourself time to process your reactions to a statement or a text and get to the root of what caused those reactions. Deep breaths release endorphins in the brain and can allow people to center themselves.

BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT YOUR LANGUAGE

Think about the language you are using, not just in terms of intent, but also in terms of impact. If someone says something you hear as offensive, consider that they may not realize they have said something hurtful. If someone calls you out for saying something offensive, remember that your intent can be different than your impact.

KEEP POWER DYNAMICS IN MIND

Remember power dynamics change based on individual's identities. Be cognizant of the fact that some voices and identities have been given privilege while other voices and identities have been discriminated against.

WE ALL MAKE MISTAKES

Inevitably, people will make mistakes when having conversations about race, racism and racial justice. If you hear something that has offended you, take time to reflect on the words said, and where appropriate, bring it up to the person in an open and direct way. Perhaps say, "I heard you say X and was wondering if you could clarify a bit more" or "when you said X I felt X, would you mind clarifying what you said?" This framework is an opportunity to acknowledge and learn from mistakes.

USE FACTS GRACIOUSLY - NOT TO SHUT DOWN A CONVERSATION

Remind people that this is a conversation. Everyone's personal experience matters. Recommend that people share information to deepen the discussion, not to shut down the conversation.

IF YOU'RE OFFENDED, CONSIDER SOME OPTIONS

*Call people "in", not "out."*³

When you are holding someone accountable for an offensive or ignorant statement, think about how to address the hurt they caused *and* still engage them in the conversation.

Move back and listen.

Take on the role of an active listener. Challenge yourself to concentrate completely on what other people are saying without interrupting and instead of crafting a response.

Remove yourself from the conversation.

Do what you need to do to take care of yourself. If you do not feel like you can continue to engage in the conversation, move away.