

Individual Tools - Interrupting Oppressive Moments: Racism

"If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality." -

Desmond Tutu

Folks who choose not to interrupt oppressive moments are complicit in allowing oppression to go unchallenged. We want our co-workers and family members to have empathy for who we are, and we want to be allies for each other and all we encounter. With practice, and built upon a foundation of a loving and trusting community, confronting racism can be less intimidating. These examples are set within a context of a house of hospitality that has guests, donors, volunteers, and community members involved.

Assertiveness Model

- **Breathe** - Ground yourself
- **Name the behavior** - Call out the remark, not the person. Naming a comment as racist is difficult; it counters our social conditioning to fit in and please.
- **Name how the behavior makes you feel OR describe the impact of the behavior** - It helps the relationship and interaction to name your feelings. Talk about what assumptions underlie the comment, and why it is racist.
- **Give a Direction** - Ask for the person to reconsider their comment, to avoid making such comments in the future, etc.
- **Stay** - Depending on the nature of your relationship (is the person a close friend, or someone you've just met?) be willing to stay in the conversation, keep engaging in the email conversation, or pursue it later.

Example

- **Volunteer:** I'm glad you're reaching out to black churches for the Close Guantanamo campaign, but they're too busy with their food pantries and other social services to think about international issues. Maybe you should focus your organizing energy in other directions?
- **You:** (Calming breath). You're making a generalization that African Americans in these churches don't think about the world around them, and I'm uncomfortable with that idea - it has racist undertones. I'd think we need to be careful about these kinds of generalizations and the harm they can do. What do you think?

Practice Scenarios for Interrupting Racism

In groups of 3, take turns responding to each scenario, using the Assertiveness Model, if it's helpful. Discuss different options for each. These examples are set within a context of a house of hospitality that has guests, donors, volunteers, and community members involved.

1. During a house tour for a Confirmation group of, white 8th graders, the adult chaperone asks, "I assume all your guests are black?" How do you respond?
2. At a family dinner, a relative asks, "Do you make those people staying with you get a job, or do you let them sit around all day?" You want to respond as a good ally, and also you're afraid of making a scene. You say...
3. A few members are talking about trying to get healthier food donated. Someone says "The guests don't really care about eating healthy, they just want their comfort food of fried chicken." What do you say?
4. During a meeting, the people of color in your community have not spoken at all. A new topic is introduced; what do you say?
5. A white volunteer is playing with an African American child, and keeps talking about the child's hair, showing it to her fellow volunteers. What do you do and say?
6. The new website is being discussed. People are saying that it should be directed at potential volunteers, rather than potential guests. What do you say?
7. When discussing a proposal to spend money in support of a campaign about police brutality, someone says, "I'd rather we spent the money on more food for the people we already serve, rather than offending our donors on an abstract issue." How do you respond?
8. Some volunteers are discussing your neighborhood, which happens to be in a poor black area that has a history of white flight and red-lining. "Is it safe here? It seems like there's a lot of crime." What do you say?
9. Your notice aloud that your community is financially supported by 90% white people. A fellow community member says, "So what? That's who supports us, who believes in our work, and who we have relationships with. There's nothing wrong with being supported by white people." How do you respond?
10. Your all-white community is in a mostly-white part of the state. When the subject of racism comes up, someone says, "Everyone in the city is white, so it's ok that we are all white too. Racism is not an issue for us." What do you say?