

# GUIDE *to* RESPECTFUL CONVERSATIONS



The first step to eliminating racism and inequality is to talk about it openly and honestly, which you're about to do. Yet, talking about racial inequality can be challenging.

Remember that each of us has multiple 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. If you're comfortable, share moments from your experience that will inform what you are emotionally bringing to the discussion and invite others to do the same.

People will have different reactions to the difficult conversations you'll be facilitating. Know that *being uncomfortable isn't always a bad thing*, especially if you're used to feeling comfortable. Your goal as the host should be to create a space in which individuals 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.



## **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 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

You might make mistakes when speaking about racial justice. If you hear something that has offended you, say "ouch" to demonstrate its impact. Explain why a comment has offended you. Then the person who said the comment has the opportunity to say "oops," sharing that they made a mistake. This framework is an opportunity to acknowledge and learn from that mistake, and then continue the conversation.

## 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."*<sup>1</sup>

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, step away.

<sup>1</sup> | For more information about the approach of calling people in, read Ngọc Loan Trân's "[Calling IN: A Less Disposable Way of Holding Each Other Accountable](#)," Black Girl Dangerous.