



NAVIGATING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE:

A Tool for White Presenting People

While white presenting Jews are not always classified as “white” by many people, especially when it’s revealed that they are Jewish, for this resource, we are referring to people and Jews who present as or are assumed to be white. This means that when someone sees them, they assume they are a white person. In North American society, white people and People of Color are often treated differently and have vastly different experiences with police officers, store clerks, educators, and others. White people are subject to both less harm as individuals as well as systemically. This is what some people refer to when they say *white privilege**.

White people and white Jews often have good intentions as they process their understanding of current events and topics around race and racism but, can still often cause harm to People of Color in the process. Many white people have a desire to be anti-racist, to prevent racism, and to be a good ally to People of Color but are unaware of the different experiences People of Color have had existing in a still very racist world. While the intentions of white people are often to show they understand and care about racism, often the impact is not what they intended. Whether a white person over-empathizes, takes up too much space in a conversation, or accidentally attempts to be the [white savior](#), there are many ways white people unintentionally “mess up” a conversation about race. While no one is perfect, cross racial dialogue can be greatly improved with some intentionality. Below are resources for white people to digest so they can prevent unnecessary harm when entering cross-racial dialogues, conversations, and spaces. While we have highlighted some important points from the resources below, we encourage you to read all of these pieces in their entirety.

* Some may bristle at the idea of white privilege, but white privilege can mean many things. It does not mean that whiteness is bad or that white people are bad, do not work hard, or do not have bad things happen to them. It can mean a police officer treating you with respect, assuming you are not violent, easily seeing people look like you reflected in leadership positions, or people assuming you went to college because you are smart, not, in turn, because of affirmative action, for example.

Just because white Jews may experience white privilege (conditionally), does not take away from the fact that they are currently experiencing skyrocketing antisemitism in various spaces, and that those who present as “traditionally Jewish” (i.e., those who wear yarmulkes) are disproportionately vulnerable, and that many spaces that seemed otherwise safe for Jews (including white presenting ones) have become hot beds for antisemitism and hate crimes.

1. ***The Black Jews Are Tired*** by former URJ writer/editor Chaim Ezra Harrison
2. ***I’m Jewish and I don’t Identify as White, Why Must I Check That Box*** by Kwame Anthony Appiah
3. Consider not just what you are doing, but how you are doing it. Many of our institutions have been shaped by racism (as well as antisemitism, sexism, ableism, etc.). Take a look at [Tema Okun’s white supremacy culture](#) and how we can disrupt problematic “business as usual”.

- **Beware a misplaced sense of urgency.**

In [Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups](#), authors Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun suggest that white-dominant groups consider “how [to] make good decisions in an atmosphere of urgency.” They explain that acting hastily in such moments “makes it difficult to take time to be inclusive, encourage democratic and/or thoughtful decision-making, to think long-term, to consider consequences.”

White Jews should not rush to make immediate decisions without Jews of Color at the table. What white people think needs to be done now may very well not be the case – and could, in fact, cause unnecessary harm. It is likely that, to some extent, immediate action is indeed needed; with respect to antiracism, though, white people should take cues from leaders of Color, particularly those who have been doing this work for many years and will continue to do so.

- **Don’t let white emotions dominate spaces.**

Jones and Okun explain that, often, dominant groups believe “that those with power have a right to emotional and psychological comfort,” and we often take up a lot of space to emote, intellectualize, and seek comfort. In the process, we can cause unintentional harm – although we’re trying to do the exact opposite. When we are given the gift of multiracial or cross-racial dialogue, we can practice taking up less space and sitting with our discomfort (including processing our emotions with other white people).

4. ***4 Ways White People Can Process Their Emotions Without Bringing the White Tears*** by Jennifer Loubriel:

- **Pause Before Contributing to the Conversation**

What you need to do is understand that your voice does not always need to be heard. Part of white supremacy as a larger system is the idea that white people are “objective” and authorities over everyone else in the room.

This kind of socializing can – and does – carry over even for white folks who do active antiracism work. Remember that while your experiences shape your worldview, they’re not the most important experiences in the room.

- **Check the Other White People in the Room**

As a white person, you have to constantly educate other white people. If you are truly committed to anti-racism work, it has to be part of your everyday life.

While you might have to have an uncomfortable conversation for a few minutes, People of Color will deal with racism for the rest of their lives.

- **Excuse Yourself If You’re Having Strong Emotions**

...she took a conversation that predominately affected the Black folks in the room and made it about her white woman tears. It forced half of the room to cater to her and alienated the other half.

As a white person in an anti-racist conversation or space, it’s important to be in touch with your emotions. You need to be aware of yourself, especially when you experience strong emotions like sadness, anger, and guilt.

If you find yourself having a strong emotional reaction during conversations about racism and there are folks in the room who experience that violence firsthand, excuse yourself from the situation.

- **Have a Support System of Other White People (see more about this also in the article below about affinity spaces)**

People of Color should not have to listen to your feelings about racism. Having to do so forces us to put aside our own complex emotions. It is also exhausting – because intentionally or not, you unloading on a Person of Color says, “My having to face my whiteness and the complex emotions that come with that is more important than the ways in which whiteness is a tool of violence against you.”

One of the healthiest things you can do is create a support group of other white people who are going through similar things.

5. **Learn more about the importance of [affinity spaces](#) (a.k.a. caucus groups):**

- [Caucus and Affinity Groups](#)
- [Why People of Color Need Spaces Without White People](#)

White people and People of Color each have work to do separately and together.

Caucuses provide spaces for people to work within their own racial/ethnic groups. For white people, a caucus provides time and space to work explicitly and intentionally on understanding white culture and white privilege and to increase one's critical analysis around these concepts. A white caucus also puts the onus on white people to teach each other about these ideas, rather than constantly relying on People of Color to teach them. For People of Color, a caucus is a place to work with their peers on their experiences of internalized racism, for healing and to work on liberation.

Michael and Conger explain that mixed-race dialogues are often inappropriate for white people, given that placing white folks in interracial dialogue is like "placing prealgebra students in a calculus class. White people have so little experience discussing race, relative to their colleagues of color, that white people need something akin to a remedial course."