



Conversation Deflections & Responses

A Resource For Keeping Race Conversations on Track
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BUT THAT WAS A LONG TIME AGO.

History matters- including slavery, which is what most people are trying to avoid discussing by dismissing history. Racism wasn't created in a vacuum. It was constructed; and we must understand how, when and why. This requires a discussion about history and cannot leave out the realities of slavery.

8

SCRIPTURE + SCRIPTURE = CLEAR?

Scripture will never be a bandaid that allows the wounds of racism to heal on their own. Scripture calls us into the brokenness, so that we may all find healing. Calls for love and unity are meaningless if we cannot practice the same by listening well to hard stories and hard truths. We must resist our desire for easy answers.

7

BUT I HEARD OPRAH SAY...

We have varied experiences, perspectives and ideas. Basing what we believe about racism on one person is unhelpful to those with whom we are currently conversing. We must maintain our desire to know how people of color around us are interpreting their experience of racism, even when those conclusions are difficult to hear.

6

I EXPERIENCED THAT ONCE, BUT I AM FINE.

Singular experiences that serve to increase our understanding of others are useful only when those experiences increase our empathy. Attempting to compare experiences that were singular, temporary or by choice should never be used to invalidate someone who cannot opt-out of experiencing racism. Similarly, studying history and critical race theory is wonderful when used to increase compassion and advocacy efforts. It is not helpful when used to silence people of color.

5

THAT DOESN'T SOUND SO BAD.

This can be a painful response for someone who is entrusting us with their story. As we listen to stories about racism we must remember these stories are cumulative. The impact of experiencing racism over time is not to be underestimated. Therefore attempts to determine the validity of someone's emotions based on how we would react or how we would feel in any given situation is to miss entirely how racism affects people of color over time.

4

YOU'RE NOT THE ONLY ONES.

The fact that other people groups have been/are being oppressed is not a good reason to stop focusing on the issue of racial oppression. Let's not minimize the importance of racism by comparing it to other forms of oppression. All forms of oppression are violent and dehumanizing. The same is true of racism, making it worthy of discussion.

3

I THINK THAT'S ACTUALLY CLASSISM.

Multiple -isms can exist in any one story. Denying the presence of racism is insulting when the person sharing has experienced a lifetime, or even generations of racism. Discussions of intersectionality can be helpful, but only when we are willing to talk about those intersections, rather than dismiss one over another.

2

STOP MAKING ME FEEL BAD.

Race conversations can be very uncomfortable. That doesn't make them bad. Just as listening to difficult stories is hard, so is telling those difficult stories. While its true we must own our emotions, it's important that we not make our personal feelings the center of the conversation for everyone. We must listen, even when it hurts.

1

BUT THAT WAS A LONG TIME AGO.

There are at least two ways to respond to this question. The first (more snarky) way is to suggest we stop celebrating the 4th of July and never speak of the 'founding fathers' again. Or you can give examples of how systemic racism has impacted current racial disparities. I often make this personal by discussing my own family's history.

8

SCRIPTURE, SCRIPTURE- CLEAR?

Appeals to Galatians 3:28 or to themes of love, unity, and being more Christ-like are used as quick solutions. Know how you interpret these Scriptures. Also, stress how the first Church in the Bible struggled to embody love, peace, and unity. It might be useful to define these terms and discuss their meaning with participants.

7

BUT I HEARD OPRAH SAY...

Feel welcome to validate the existence of a specific viewpoint and know that you can offer greater context for the idea presented. Also offer alternative ideas. You can share your own views or ask if other participants have different views they would like to contribute. There is no need to present people of color as monolithic.

6

I EXPERIENCED THAT ONCE, BUT I AM FINE.

This is an opportunity to dive into those singular experiences for just a moment by asking questions regarding how it felt to be singled out, discriminated against, or on the receiving end of prejudice. Even if the person refuses to tap into the negative emotions of those experiences, you can ask (or state) the following: "How might it feel if those experiences started at 4 years old?" or "What if those experience weren't limited to being overseas, but defined living in your own country?" Cumulative impact is important.

5

THAT DOESN'T SOUND SO BAD.

Sometimes this response can be avoided by giving ground rules that instructs how the group will respond after someone shares a painful story. For example, we might agree to wait a couple seconds and have a few people respond by saying "thank you." However, if someone questions the impact of racism, follow with questions that ask everyone to enter into the emotion. Examples: "What if it is as bad as she says it is?" or "What if it was that impactful or jarring for him?" Validating the story and letting the emotion live is the goal.

4

YOU'RE NOT THE ONLY ONES.

The number of ways humans have oppressed one another is disturbingly high. You might have participants list them and the explain similarities to racism, thereby validating the discussion of racism. It is also acceptable to call participants back to focus specifically on racial oppression for the purposes of your time together.

3

I THINK THATS MORE CLASSISM.

This response usually reveals a desire to talk about almost any -ism other than race. Born out of a fear of being called racist, the goal of this response is to avoid that word. You can affirm other -isms might be at work and still call participants to focus on the role of racism. If there is a sincere desire to be intersectional, don't shy away.

2

STOP MAKING ME FEEL BAD.

I often make space for emotion check-ins during race discussions. Usually by asking for just one word, we can name and express changing emotions during our time together. I do so at least twice in an hour. But you can remind participants that no one can make them feel anything. Everyone must own their emotions.

1