

# Help Yourself Out of Racism: A Five-Step Guide for White Women<sup>1</sup>

## *Step One: Recognizing the Problem*

Racism is not limited to extremists groups. Without the support of us regular white folks, racism wouldn't exist. Racism is not limited to conservative or right-wing politics. Racism is found in left-wing, liberal and radical groups as well. The difference is that white right-wing and conservative groups are generally self-aware about their racism. Racism flourishes in white liberal and radical circles because white people remain silent about race, refuse to see racism where it does occur, and fail to address the reality of racism in their groups structures and principles.

Here are some examples of how silence, refusal, and structure create racist environments:

**Silence:** A newcomer to a lesbian coming-out group makes a racist statement. No one in the all-white group challenges the statement. While socializing afterwards, people express the wish some lesbians of colour had been present to address the comment.

**Refusal:** Several women of colour approach a community group about their experience of racism within the group. The groups's (all-white) leadership names two people of colour who have not complained, and uses this as "proof" that the group is not racist and that the women complaining are "overly sensitive." The leadership asks for a detailed report of alleged racist incidents, placing the entire burden of proof upon the women presenting the issue.

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**Structural:** A Toronto group committed to opposing poverty never considers the influence of race or colour upon income and job opportunity. They take the same approach with every case and ignore racial factors in an attempt to be "fair." When this is noted the board expresses concern over appearing to give people of colour "special consideration."

### **Action List**

- Challenge racist remarks when you hear them. Don't wait for a person of colour to do it for you. Try a phrase such as, "I disagree with your remark, and I believe it reinforces racist stereotypes."
- When people of colour come forward to share an experience of racism, or a race-based concern, listen. The people bringing forward the issue wouldn't do so unless they had a commitment to improving the organization.
- Raise the question of how your groups and organizations deal with issues related to race. If your group is almost all white, ask yourself, "why?" Are people of colour in leadership positions? Are they present as token members, or do they have any effect on policy? Support cultural competency training or other initiatives to make your group a welcoming environment. Adopt a policy of anti-racist action. There is no such thing as a neutral stance on racism.

### ***Step Two: Educate Yourself***

The wrong way to do this is to view every person of colour that you meet as a potential teacher. People of colour are not there to answer all your questions about race and ethnicity.

Some white people mistakenly replace education with tokenism. They set out to make a

friend who is a person of colour. This friend is expected to act as their Yoda in all issues of racism. And it lends a certain air of verisimilitude to statements that begin with "some of my best friends are..."

### **Action List**

- If you can look up the answer in the library, don't ask a person of colour. They are not a library substitute.
- Make a point to read books by people of colour on topics already of interest to you. If you only read white authors, you're missing the perspective of the majority of the population.
- Get thee to a workshop. Racial sensitivity examines racist attitudes. Cultural Competency examines general assumptions about those we deem to be different.

### ***Step Three: Stop Confessing***

White people often confess their racism to people of colour (usually women, who are expected to be more sympathetic). This type of confession is a defence mechanism. The thinking does like this: "If I trust you with my confession of racism, you can't use it against me." By confessing their racist behaviours, thoughts and actions to particular people of colour, white people define their relationship with those people as exempt from challenge. This confession methodology demands that women of colour play the role of racial representative, forgiving the racist sins and absolving the white woman of her guilt.

### **Action List**

- If you need to confess, do so to yourself, or to other white women. Particular people

of colour cannot absolve you for racist actions against others.

### ***Step Four: Recognize Guilt that Substitutes for Action***

Guilt is the proper response to having participated in wrongdoing against another. But guilt is not an end in itself. Some white people use guilt as an excuse for failing to address the causes of racism with action. Guilt as self-imposed suffering is often used to argue "I feel bad enough already," thereby absolving the person of having to really do anything about it. This is sometimes part of a larger pattern of using guilt to sandbag action.

#### **Action List**

- When you experience guilt, identify the specific ways you have personally participated in wrongdoing.
- Make a plan of action that goes beyond "feeling really bad" for a few days/weeks.
- Ask yourself if you regularly use guilt to prevent action. Ex: a desire to eat healthy and exercise more is expressed through an hour of self-critique about will-power rather than actual changes to diet and routine.
- Call others on their use of guilt to avoid action.

### ***Step Five: Personalize the Problem***

You cannot end all the world's racism by yourself. You can only affect the immediate environment around you. Don't set your sights at changing the structure of society; that makes people burn out.

#### **Action List**

- Recognize the many ways you benefit from racism (Hint: North American industry

- was built on the free labour produced by slavery and race-based wages).
- Don't be afraid to make mistakes. Having our racism exposed is scary, but it makes it easier to address.
  - Direct your anger where it belongs. Don't be more critical of people who point out racism than you are of the structures and attitudes (including silences) that support racism in the first place.
  - Volunteer your time with anti-racist action groups.
  - Express how important fighting racism is to you-but express this to other white people. Just as men speaking against sexism, and heterosexuals speaking against homophobia are often more effective than voices deemed "biased," white people can use their presumed "objectivity" (a form of white privilege) to dismantle racist assumptions.

This five-step self help program is designed only as a beginning. Individual results may vary. Loss of racism is not guaranteed.