

Ways to Respond

adapted from

Witnessing Whiteness: The Need to Talk about Race and How to do it.

Feel free to use this chart as a model. Create alternative approaches for various issues you might concentrate on as a group.

Practiced Approaches for Confronting Avoidance Strategies

Questioning: When a person says something that denies the impacts of race, ask a question that challenges the avoidant strategy. "When you say _____, it sounds like you are saying _____, but I am not sure if this is what you mean?" Continue as needed, with the questions becoming more explicitly challenging. Here are some places to start:

1. "Do you really mean that you don't see color? How is that possible?"
2. "Even if you don't believe in race, do you believe everyone feels that way?"
3. "What if someone else believes that being a member of their race impacts their life? Can you accept that? What if they tell you they have experienced racism coming from you? If you don't see race, then how do you know it's not true?"
4. "What if believing you are colorblind makes you less able to see racism? How would you feel about that?"

Educating: Inform people why their statements are troubling. Make short statements, such as, "You know, when I hear what you are saying, it reminds of when I thought something similar. But, then I read something that made me realize that _____." Or, say something like, "Hey, I know sometimes that seems the best way for us to move forward, but I found out recently that _____." To be more direct, say, "I understand that you mean it as a way forward, but what comes with that idea are often attitudes that ignore and deny continuing racism."

Expressing personal emotional reaction: Tell people making avoidant statements what it is like for you to hear those things. Ask the person to respect who you are and notice that his or her speech brings up challenging feelings for you. Say something like, "When you say that, I feel _____ and that makes it hard for me to be here with you." (This strategy may be most effective with close friends and family.) Be sure to explain why you hold the perspective you do, how you came to understand it, and why it's hard for you to hear the person speaking as he or she does.

Empathetic relating: Invite people using avoidant language to imagine how they would feel if an important aspect of their lives was being negated. Say, "You know, when you say that, I can't help but imagine what people who see their race as important would feel if they heard that. Can you imagine what it would feel like if people were sitting around denying how meaningful it is for us to _____? Then ask, "Wow, how would that make you feel? I know for me it would be hard to have part of my life experience dismissed in that way."