



Anti-Racism Action Guide: How to Talk with Adult Psychotherapy Patient about Race, Racism, and Anti-Racism

The recent killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks, and other Black people have drawn national attention to the racism that Black people (and other people of color) have experienced for centuries and continue to experience today. It has always been important to discuss race, racism, and anti-racism in psychotherapy, and the current national focus on racial injustice provides an urgent reminder to engage in these conversations with all patients, regardless of whether we have done so in the past.

Although you should always consider people's treatment goals, it is important to initiate conversations about race and racism with all patients. Our lived experiences are influenced by our racial identities, and conversations about race and racism help us more fully understand patients, their presenting concerns, and their treatment needs. In addition, when we initiate conversations about race and racism, patients learn that we are open to discussing these topics. These topics are often avoided by providers and patients because they usually provoke uncomfortable emotions. Patients, especially people of color, may also hesitate to discuss race and racism due to potential risks (e.g., being accused of "exaggeration"). Finally, meaningful conversations about race and racism can strengthen therapeutic relationships and increase patients' willingness to engage in sensitive conversations in the future.

It is also vital to discuss *anti-racism*, which involves a recognition of the individual, interpersonal, and systemic nature of racism and a commitment to actively reduce race-based power imbalances. Promoting anti-racism is often consistent with people's therapeutic goals (e.g., building stronger relationships, developing cognitive flexibility and more accurate perceptions of reality). Discussing anti-racism is key for people who benefit from White privilege (unearned advantages afforded to people who are White or pass for White). These patients may not be aware of racism and how they contribute to it, and discussing anti-racism is aligned with our ethical obligation to support the communities that we serve.

This anti-racism action guide provides tips for talking about race, racism, and anti-racism with adult psychotherapy patients, along with a list of pertinent resources. Given the historical marginalization of Black people in the United States and the current national attention on anti-Black racism, many of the examples in this guide focus on anti-Black racism, including anti-Black police brutality.

Be Prepared

- Explore your own racial identity and personal biases
 - Review the “Self-Exploration” anti-racism action guide
- Familiarize yourself with racial identity development models (see the *Summary of Stages of Racial Identity Development* document listed below), which provide insight into the range of perspectives that people may have about race and racism
- Learn about the details of race-based injustices (e.g., the killings of unarmed Black people) so you are informed during conversations with patients
- Engage in conversations about race, racism, and anti-racism with coworkers, family members, friends, etc., to increase your comfort with and knowledge about these topics

Adopt a Culturally Humble Approach

- Remain curious
 - Remember, patients are the experts on their own experiences
- Recognize that each person experiences their cultural context in a unique way, and that people from the same racial group can have very different perspectives

Ask Your Patients about their Racial/Ethnic Identities

- Ask patients about their racial/ethnic backgrounds during the initial sessions and do not assume their backgrounds or the race/ethnicity of their family members
 - “One way I like to get to know my patients is by asking about some of their identities,” “One important identity for many patients is race/ethnicity,” or “Would you feel comfortable talking about your racial/ethnic background?”
- Ask people about their racial/ethnic identities even if you have worked with them for a while and have not talked about this topic
 - It may be helpful to initiate a conversation about racism using one of the examples below, and then ask “I don’t want to assume any of your identities. How do you identify with regard to your race/ethnicity?”

Initiate Conversations about Racism

- Initiate conversations about racism with all patients, even if you have not talked about race in the past
 - “Many people are experiencing strong emotions in response to the recent killings of unarmed Black people. What are your reactions?”
 - “I know we have not talked a lot about race and racism in our sessions. I want you to know that I am open to talking about race and racism. What are your thoughts and feelings about us discussing these topics?”
- Use language that avoids victim blaming
 - For example, refer to the “death/killing/murder” of a Black person instead of a “misunderstanding” or an “incident”
- Accept that some people will not want to discuss race/racism

Respond with Therapeutic Listening that Acknowledges Racism

- Utilize therapeutic listening skills

- Validate people's experiences and normalize their emotions
- A White provider may say the following to a Black patient: "I can only imagine the pain you are feeling in response to this racism"
- Notice if you become uncomfortable and start to talk more than usual; if so, re-focus your energy on listening to the patient
- Ask additional questions to help patients process their thoughts and feelings:
 - "What emotions have these acts of racism brought up for you?"
 - "What else have you been thinking about with regard to police brutality?"
 - "Have these racist acts reminded you of any experiences you have had related to racism?"
- Avoid phrases suggesting that you can fully understand the experiences of patients of color (e.g., avoid "I completely understand what you're going through") if you are White or pass for White

Explore How Racial Identity May Affect the Therapeutic Relationship

- Explore this topic in all provider-patient relationships, especially in cross-racial dyads
 - "You are [race/ethnicity] and I am [race/ethnicity]. How do you think this may affect our work together?"
 - "What is it like for you to talk with a [race/ethnicity] provider about race and racism?"

Initiate Conversations about Anti-Racism (Particularly with White Patients)

- Ask patients whether they have heard of the term *anti-racism*, and if so, what they know
- Discuss how our culture is influenced by white supremacy and racism, and that everyone (and especially White people) have inherited biases and stereotypes about Black people and other people of color
 - "What messages did you receive about race and racism when you were growing up?"
- Explain that anti-racism involves recognizing and addressing biases within ourselves and society
- Use appropriate self-disclosure to normalize recognizing and addressing biases
- Invite patients to talk more about anti-racism; this can be done in the context of patients' goals
 - "I know you wanted to learn more about yourself and live a life that is aligned with your values. I think anti-racism could be one part of this journey. Do you want to talk more about anti-racism?"
 - "Have you ever recognized a racial bias that you held and worked to address it?"
 - "Have you noticed any racial biases that sometimes pop into your head?"
- Acknowledge that discussing complicity in racism can provoke strong feelings of shame and make people (especially White people) feel defensive
- Offer resources for patients to work toward anti-racism (see *Anti-Racism Resources* below)

Conclude Conversations about Race, Racism & Anti-Racism in a Meaningful Way

- Ask patients what it was like for them to discuss race and racism
 - “Today we discussed a lot about race and racism. How was it for you to discuss these topics in therapy?”
- Acknowledge that talking about race/racism can be difficult for most people, and express appreciation for patients’ willingness to engage in these conversations
- Self-reflect after the session about your experience of the conversation
 - Note personal thoughts or feelings that facilitated or hindered the therapeutic process

Consider these Additional Considerations

- Avoid colorblindness ideology that implies all people are treated equally (e.g., questioning whether a bad experience was driven by racism, saying that you don’t “see race”)
- Avoid displaying *overly intense* interest in the patient’s race-based experiences, which may send an underlying message that you are uncomfortable discussing race and racism
- Seek ongoing supervision and consultation that focuses on talking with patients about race, racism, and anti-racism

RESOURCES

This action guide was developed by compiling information from the below resources. You can review each resource to learn more about the topics.

ANTI-RACISM RESOURCES

Antiracism Resources. Good Good Good. <https://www.goodgoodgood.co/anti-racism-resources>

North, A. (2020, June 3). *What it means to be anti-racist*. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/2020/6/3/21278245/antiracist-racism-race-books-resources-antiracism>

CREATING SAFETY FOR BLACK PATIENTS

Zencare. (2018). *10 Ways White Therapists Can Create Safety For Black Patients*. The Couch: A Therapy & Mental Wellness Blog. <https://blog.zencare.co/how-white-therapists-address-racism-black-patients/>

CULTURAL HUMILITY

Fisher-Borne, M., Cain, J. M., & Martin, S. L. (2015). From Mastery to Accountability: Cultural Humility as an Alternative to Cultural Competence. *Social Work Education*, 34(2), 165–181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2014.977244>

Tervalon, M., & Murray-Garcia, J. (1998). Cultural humility versus cultural competence: A critical distinction in defining physician training outcomes in multicultural education. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, 9(2), 117–125.

https://melanietervalon.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/CulturalHumility_Tervalon-and-Murray-Garcia-Article.pdf

DIFFICULT DIALOGUES ABOUT RACE

Sue, D. W. (2015). *Race talk and facilitating difficult racial dialogues*. Counseling Today. <https://ct.counseling.org/2015/12/race-talk-and-facilitating-difficult-racial-dialogues/>

MULTICULTURAL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE COUNSELING COMPETENCIES

Ratts, M. J., Singh, A. A., Butler, S. K., Nassar-McMillan, S., & McCullough, J. R. (2016). *Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies: Practical applications in counseling*. Counseling Today. <https://ct.counseling.org/2016/01/multicultural-and-social-justice-counseling-competencies-practical-applications-in-counseling/>

RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Summary of Stages of Racial Identity Development.

https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/Compilation_of_Racial_Identity_Models_7_15_11.pdf

TALKING ABOUT RACISM AND ANTI-BLACK POLICE BRUTALITY IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

Dale, S. K., & Daniel, J. H. (2013). Talking about the Trayvon Martin Case in Psychology and Counseling Training and Psychotherapy. *Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology*, 5(1), 37–49. <https://doi.org/10.33043/JSACP.5.1.37-49>

Jones, R. S. (2020). *Stop Hesitating*. Psychology Today.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/spirit-in-session/202006/stop-hesitating>

McCorvey, E. (2020). *Stop Hesitating: A Resource for Psychotherapists and Counselors*. ACPE News.

<https://www.acpe.edu/ACPE/News/Stories/2020/MemberResource060120.aspx>

Robinson, M., Ross, K., & Endsley, M. (2020). *Guidance for Providers Addressing Community Trauma*. https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/resources-for-counselors/talking-points-for-clinicians-around-community-trauma.pdf?sfvrsn=fb67212c_4

Stone, M. R. (2013). “Somebody better put their pants on and be talking about it”: White therapists who identify as anti-racist addressing racism and racial identity with White patients [Smith College]. <https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses/605>

TALKING ABOUT RACE IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

Cardemil, E. V., & Battle, C. L. (2003). Guess who’s coming to therapy? Getting comfortable with conversations about race and ethnicity. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 34(3), 278–286. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0735-7028.34.3.278>

Jackson, C. (2018). *Why we need to talk about race*. Counseling Today. <https://www.bacp.co.uk/bacp-journals/therapy-today/2018/october-2018/why-we-need-to-talk-about-race/>

Knox, S., Burkard, A. W., Johnson, A. J., Suzuki, L. A., & Ponterotto, J. G. (2003). African American and European American therapists' experiences of addressing race in cross-racial psychotherapy dyads. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 50(4), 466–481. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.50.4.466>

Work, G. B., Cropper, R., & Dalenberg. (2014). *Talking About Race in Trauma Psychotherapy*. Society for the Advancement of Psychotherapy. <https://societyforpsychotherapy.org/talking-about-race-in-trauma-psychotherapy/>

TALKING WITH WHITE PATIENTS ABOUT WHITE FRAGILITY

Guenther, J. (2019). *This is How I Address White Fragility in my Therapy Practice. How Do You?* TherapyDen. <https://www.therapyden.com/news/how-i-address-white-fragility-in-my-therapy-practice>