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# Being Antiracist

The impacts of racism on Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) run deep. Discrimination, racial profiling, abuse at the hand of people in power, socio-economic distress, chronic stress, and poor physical health are the result of systemic racism in our culture.

There also exists a racial ethnic hierarchy, or ethnic racism under the larger umbrella of racism. What does this mean exactly? Racial ethnic hierarchy means that you happily consume and perhaps even promote racist ideas about other ethnic groups while actively disputing the racist ideas about your own group.(1)

We've been taught that racist ideas create racist policies and that ignorance or unawareness and hate cause racist ideas. This is simply not the case. Looking back at the long history of racism, racist ideas were created to justify the racist policies of the era by powerful intellectuals.(1) Political, economic and cultural self-interest have been behind many racist policies in North America.

## Past racist ideals

In the past, powerful leaders created racist policies that established systemic racism in our culture. Many of these ideals are still held today.

**Assimilationists** believe that a particular racial group (or groups) is inferior and support ideas that the inferiority can be reversed through assimilation into whiteness.(2) This is a racist idea.

**Segregationists** believe that the inferior racial groups can never be developed and support the policy of segregating or separating those racial groups away from the superior group. This is a racist idea.

In the past, these racist ideas were explicit. Leaders were very open about the creation of their racist ideas. But if all the racist ideas were created by individuals with power, doesn't that mean they can be unmade too?

#### **But I'm not racist!**

Many people claim that they aren't racist. Ibram X. Kendi explains that people think the terms "racist" and "not racist" apply to who they are, as fixed categories; that is to say that they are either racist or not racist. Kendi argues that the term "racist" should be understood as a descriptor rather than as part of a person's identity. He states that it "describes what a person is being in any given moment, based on what they are saying or not saying, doing or not doing." (3)

Racist thoughts that are linked to policies creating harmful differences between White people and BIPOC can easily take root. When saying "But I'm not racist," it becomes difficult for you to examine how your thoughts, actions or ideas may actually be racist. When denying that racism exists in Canada, you dismiss the experiences that BIPOC face, and dismiss the long history of racism in Canada and that systems were built on racist ideas. Kendi goes on to say that "in order to be antiracist, we have to express ideas of racial equality. We have to support policies that are leading to racial equity. We have to challenge ideas that there's something wrong with Latinx people, we have to challenge policies that are dispossessing Native land." (3)

Without the ability to see your racist thoughts, actions or ideas you will continue to support racist inequalities and inequities that BIPOC must deal with. To defeat systemic racism, you need to work towards equality for all races, or be antiracist. While individual people today aren't responsible for the racist systems historically created, we all have a responsibility to break those systems down. We must, as Kendi states, challenge those policies and systems.

Simply put, someone who thinks of themselves as "not racist" may not say racist things or engage in racist acts, but also does not say anything to shut down racist behaviour, racist acts or correct someone who makes racist comments. Someone who is antiracist on the other hand, will respectfully point out racist actions. They let the world know where they stand, even if they can't change everything. (4)

#### **What can I do to start my journey in becoming antiracist?**

There are number of ways that you can do the hard work to be antiracist. Kirsten Ivey-Colson and Lynn Turner founded an organization called the AntiRacist Table and suggest advice and tools you can use to work against racist ideas, thoughts, actions and policies. (5)

They suggest starting with education. Acknowledging the history of systemic racism and learning about the implicit biases that we all have allows us to take steps to stop it. Undertake this education on your own; don't expect BIPOC to educate you. Learn with humility. If BIPOC share their personal experiences with you, validate their experiences and be aware of their vulnerability. To continue on your journey of becoming antiracist Ivey-Colson and Turner suggest that you:

- Set intentions for yourself. Antiracism isn't a status to reach. It's a way a life. As with all new things we start, antiracism requires a conscious decision to show up and do the hard work. Set goals to be aware of what you say and do. Remind yourself why you want to be antiracist. Affirming this will remind you of your goal and help you stick to it.
- Be courageous. It's difficult to face white privilege, racism and white supremacy. To be antiracist, you have to be able to sit with your discomfort. In her book *White Fragility*, Robin DiAngelo explains how white fragility is a powerful means of white racial control and protects racial white advantage. (6) As we work through our difficult feelings and as we learn about our white privilege, white supremacy and racism, DiAngelo suggests we engage in the following behaviours: reflection, apology, listening, processing, grappling, engaging, believing and seeking more understanding.
- See individuality. Understand that people of colour, Indigenous people and Black people have been assigned to a stereotypical negative group identity: lazy, irresponsible, dangerous, angry. Labeling Asians as so called "model minorities," (successful, problem-free, favoured neighbours and non-threatening), as opposed to Black people (problem minorities) created destructive stereotypes to individual Asians and Asians as a group. Not only did this pit "good minorities" (Asian people) against "bad minorities" (Black people), the model minority myth implies that Asians don't need anti-racist programs, renders them invisible to broader society and obscures anti-Asian racism. (7) These are dangerous stereotypes that prevent us from seeing BIPOC as individuals and individual groups with different needs. As the coronavirus spread around the world in 2020, anti-Asian racism surged. The conversation about the unique racism and dangers faced by the Asian community has now finally started. (8)
- Seek humanity and empathy. Humanity is at the heart of antiracism. Racism is incivility and goes against what most people say they value. You don't need to be BIPOC, have a Black partner or have BIPOC friends to stand up to racism. As John Amaechi states, "If I'd intervene on something that's racist, it's not on my behalf or another one of my black colleagues. It's because it's an incivility against the values that people say they share." (9) Empathy creates connection and breaks down the divide. It allows you to see "outsiders" as human beings and no different from yourself. Giving more rights to oppressed and marginalized populations does not diminish your own rights.
- Work at being antiracist. As Ibram X. Kendi states, an antiracist is: "one who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea." (1) To be antiracist, you must actively be working to promote and create antiracist policies. One must see all racial groups as equals and promote equity of all groups or people (ethnicity, gender, religion, sexuality, colour, age, ability).
- Become an ally. Allyship is more than saying you're an ally. It takes hard work and is a lifelong process. Allies support, empower or stand up for another person or group of people, even though the ally is not a member of that group. (10) Educate yourself to do your best to understand what it's like to live with oppression, and put that knowledge into action.
- Choose love over fear and oppression. Love allows you to see other people as individuals, and with compassion.

Remember not to make this about yourself and don't make excuses for other people's behaviour. As you embark on this journey, take time to reflect on the choices you make in your daily life. Who you choose to have relationships with. Where you choose to shop. What media you choose to follow. The choices you make should align with your intention to be antiracist.

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