

FROM Anti-RACIST
COOKBOOK
by Robin Parker
+ Pamela Smith
Chambers

Chapter 5 DESSERTS

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*Desserts are an optional part of the meal,
but sometimes the most satisfying.*

—The Authors

Conversational Intervention Strategies

It happens all the time: Someone says something mean-spirited, hurtful, or insensitive about a cultural group, or they use dismissive stock phrases to shut down meaningful conversation about race and diversity. Mustering a rejoinder is not always easy. The social or business situation, or the relationship we have with the speaker, can make it awkward, uncomfortable, or even intimidating to respond.

But responding is certainly worthwhile. It is an immediate way that individuals can positively affect the people around them. When we respond to insensitive comments, we raise awareness

about diversity and make it more likely that the person with whom we are speaking will be more sensitive when he or she interacts with others.

Don't think that your interventions, though small, will have no significant impact. Even if your responses touch only your family, friends, and coworkers, each of those individuals has connections to many others. The effect of your response can be more far-reaching than you may realize.

People often tell us that they aren't sure how to respond when someone says something that rankles them. Surprise, awkwardness, or the inability to think quickly in the moment makes it hard to formulate an appropriate response. The intervention strategies below give you an advantage: they explain why certain comments need your objection and how you can effectively respond to them.

SOMEONE SAYS, "I DON'T SEE COLOR."

EXPLANATION: Of course, people do see color and race. In fact, studies show that, along with gender, race is one of the first things we notice about others. What people are trying to say is that they don't have racial prejudices and that their "inability" to see color is evidence of that. Working against prejudice, however, is best done by not lying about seeing race in an effort to prove that we are well-meaning. Such honesty avoids the trap of confusing an awareness of an individual's race with a motive to hurt an individual because of his or her racial background. The way to address prejudice and discrimination is to be *conscious* of race. By doing so, we can address racial inequities, and offer empathy to persons whose racial backgrounds are different from our own.

RESPONSE: "I do, but my seeing color doesn't mean I see race as a deficit. Like gender and sexual orientation, race is one of the many factors that defines a person's identity."



Quick Fact

ABOUT COLORBLINDNESS

The idea of a "color-blind" nation first appeared in Justice John Marshall Harlan's famous dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, a case that upheld "separate but equal" accommodations for people of color. Harlan said, "Our constitution is color-blind," and wrote that state laws that mandated "separate but equal" accommodations were unconstitutional. The phrase is often misused to support the notion of a color-blind society in which race does not matter. Actually, Harlan was using the term "color-blind" to say that *in the eye of the law*, white people were not entitled to civil rights superior to those of persons of color. Although Harlan felt that state legislatures could not use "separate-but-equal" statutes to enforce racial inequality, he did not believe that the races were in fact equal. His fuller statement is as follows:

The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is, in prestige, in achievements, in education, in wealth, and in power. So, I doubt not, it will continue to be for all time, if it remains true to its great heritage, and holds fast to the principles of constitutional liberty. But in view of the constitution, in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here. Our constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law.



(Cont.) Thus, Harlan opined that people of color were the legal equals of white people; nevertheless, he saw persons of color as socially inferior. We believe that only the former is true, and that, as in Harlan's dissent, advocating color-blindness neither negates underlying racial prejudice nor accepts the notion of racial equality, both legal *and* social.

SOMEONE ASKS, "WHY DO WE NEED TO KEEP TALKING ABOUT RACE?"

EXPLANATION: This often comes up when people feel afraid, overwhelmed, or threatened about racial issues, and they want to stop a useful conversation. Actually, race is not often talked about except superficially.

RESPONSE: "Race is important because we all have one, and our racial backgrounds affect our life experiences in important ways. Our job opportunities, whether or not we are subject to racial discrimination, and how we view society are all shaped by race."

SOMEONE SAYS, "EVERYONE SHOULD PULL THEMSELVES UP BY THEIR OWN BOOTSTRAPS."

EXPLANATION: Most people work very hard; however, few individuals achieve success solely because of their own hard work. Most succeed because they have the additional support of family, friends, community, and social connections. Also, people don't begin their lives with equal advantages. Being reared in a family or community with greater economic wealth or political influence makes success more likely; being reared without those things—one of the usual conditions of being a person of color in the United States—makes success more difficult.



Quick Fact BOOTSTRAP PHYSICS

According to physics, you can't pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. More formally stated, "For a force to accelerate an object, it must come from outside the object." Anyone who says otherwise is literally wrong.

RESPONSE: "Not everyone has bootstraps to pull and some people don't even have boots."

SOMEONE SAYS, "BLACK PEOPLE ARE RACIST, TOO."

EXPLANATION: Racism and prejudice are not the same. Everyone has prejudices, including black people. Racism, however, is a term that implies the use of institutional power to discriminate against a racial group—something that black people generally cannot do. The comment is often a way to deflect responsibility for making positive change away from the speaker: If black people are racist, so the logic goes, then the speaker doesn't have any responsibility to work on his or her own prejudices.

RESPONSE: "Black people, like everyone else, have prejudices, but that doesn't minimize the work that white people need to do to address racism."

SOMEONE SAYS, "BUT SLAVERY HAPPENED A LONG TIME AGO...IT'S NOT MY FAULT."

EXPLANATION: The effects of historical events reach way into the future and have long-lasting ramifications. The ramifications of slavery affect the social, economic, and political opportunities of African Americans in the United States. African American college

graduates earn about 20 percent less than their white counterparts. It wasn't until the 1960s that larger numbers of African Americans were permitted to attend colleges and universities to help improve their economic futures. A thorough study of U.S. history must link past events to current experience. Yet when it comes to slavery, people often balk at making that connection. Although talking about slavery may be painful or embarrassing, ignoring slavery keeps people from understanding its consequences in the present day.

RESPONSE: "It isn't your fault, but it is your responsibility to address what the legacy of slavery continues to do to African Americans and our society as a whole."

SOMEONE SAYS, "I'M NOT PREJUDICED."

EXPLANATION: We don't give anyone brownie points for claiming not to have prejudices; everyone has them. The real trick is having a dedication to working against them. This requires giving up the pretense of being an unprejudiced person and getting in touch with your own prejudices, many of which will be unconscious. Often the phrase, "I'm not prejudiced," is followed by the qualifier "but" with a justification for the very prejudice that is disclaimed.

RESPONSE: "I think everyone has prejudices, including me. Given the societal messages about race and racial difference, it's impossible not to. Acknowledging personal prejudices is a first step to undoing them."

SOMEONE SAYS, "SOME OF MY BEST FRIENDS ARE BLACK."

EXPLANATION: Just because an individual has friends of a different race doesn't mean the individual is free of racial prejudice or that he or she has nothing to learn about handling racial issues in a respectful manner.

RESPONSE: "That's great, but let's talk about the issue at hand."

SOMEONE SAYS, "LET ME TELL YOU A JOKE ABOUT THE BLACK MAN, THE CHINESE MAN, AND THE PARROT...."

EXPLANATION: Racial and ethnic jokes perpetuate stereotypes and are harmful—even if members of the "targeted" group are not present. Because the jokes are meant to be funny and people often say they "don't mean anything by them," the jokes are a sneaky way to put people down and reinforce negative thinking about cultural groups. The ramifications are enormous. Listeners get the message that "those people" are fodder for ridicule, and although it wouldn't be "politically correct" to make overtly disparaging comments about them, they can be humiliated because it is "just a joke." Even if the speaker is a member of the joke's targeted group, telling racial or ethnic jokes is no less harmful. It still castigates the targeted group and promotes stereotypical thinking.

RESPONSE: "I'd really rather not hear that kind of joke," or "Please don't tell that kind of joke around me," with an explanation of why it is bothersome.

SOMEONE SAYS, "HE DIDN'T MEAN ANYTHING BY THAT; HE'S JUST JOKING AROUND."

EXPLANATION: This comment usually arises when someone is trying to excuse a racist comment made by a third party. Humor is not an excuse for insensitive comments, however, because humor is one of the primary ways stereotypes are perpetuated. The key here is to put the defending party on notice that the behavior is inexcusable and that the issue should not be dismissed.

RESPONSE: "He may not have intended the comment to be offensive, but it was to me."

SOMEONE ASKS, "AREN'T THINGS BETTER TODAY?"

EXPLANATION: Although there have been significant strides made in civil rights, the plight of persons of color remains economically and socially difficult. Often when people ask this question, they are suggesting that there is no social justice work left to do. In fact, a careful examination of income statistics, incarceration rates, and discrimination patterns in education, housing, and employment shows that racial inequities still exist.

RESPONSE: "Things have gotten better, but there is still significant work to be done. The playing field still isn't level."



Author's Insight – Robin
SOCIETAL PROGRESS ON RACE

My great grandfather was a slave. My grandfather lived in rural poverty. My father graduated from college and later earned a doctoral degree. I'm an attorney and have lived in the middle class all my life. Things have gotten better for me, my family, and many persons of color. But what makes the United States great is not how we celebrate our progress, but how we push ourselves to meet our stated values and ideals, and grapple with our shortcomings.

SOMEONE SAYS, "I'VE BEEN THE VICTIM OF PREJUDICE, TOO."

EXPLANATION: This comment usually arises when an individual wants to minimize the experience of persons of color by making it the same as or less painful than their own experience. Of course white people experience prejudice, but it is divisive to diminish the experience of racism by playing the "I've-been-hurt-too" game.

RESPONSE: "Since you've been the victim of prejudice, you can use that experience to begin to understand how racism feels. Understanding racism is important because it hurts persons of color all the time; we need to talk about racism so we can combat it."

SOMEONE ASKS, "ISN'T THAT REVERSE RACISM?"

EXPLANATION: There is a difference between being hurt by prejudice and discrimination, and being oppressed by racism. Prejudice and discrimination are carried out by individuals; racism is carried out by institutions (courts, schools, businesses, etc.) that reflect the dominant culture, which in the U.S. is the culture of white people of European descent. Reverse racism is a misnomer because it presumes that racism is the same as prejudice and discrimination. This comment is a way to say that "black people are prejudiced too," or that black people are asking for "special privileges" through programs such as affirmative action.

RESPONSE: "Black people have prejudices like everyone else, but racism is an institutional problem that hurts persons of color. Let's talk about issues of fairness and keep issues of institutional power and historical discrimination in mind."

SOMEONE SAYS, "JUST TELL ME WHAT I HAVE TO DO."

EXPLANATION: White people sometimes expect a list of quick (and easy) things they can do to eliminate racism. We wish that there were such a list! Unfortunately, eliminating racism is not like implementing a new math curriculum. Racism is a long-existing problem that our society has been struggling with since its inception. It will take multiple approaches and hard work to solve.

RESPONSE: "Dedicate yourself to a lifelong pursuit of the elimination of racism. This work begins with your own education about racial identity and racism, and includes striving to eliminate racism in your own environment."

SOMEONE SAYS, "YOU'RE PREACHING TO THE CHOIR."

EXPLANATION: This comment usually comes from individuals who believe that they understand all they need to know about racism, and that further conversation or learning needs to be focused on "those other people." Learning about anti-racism, however, requires a commitment to lifelong learning and the willingness to be a perpetual student as well as a teacher.

RESPONSE: "Even the choir members need to listen to and learn from the sermon."

SOMEONE SAYS, "YOU (A PERSON OF COLOR) HAVE TO TEACH ME (A WHITE PERSON) WHAT TO DO TO ADDRESS THIS PROBLEM."

EXPLANATION: White people sometimes believe that the only way that they can learn about racism is from people of color. In fact, people of color tire of teaching about racism because what they say is frequently rejected. Other sources of knowledge about racism include books, movies, magazines, newspapers, documentaries, and training workshops.

RESPONSE: "I'll help you if I can, but let me share information about the other resources that are available to you."

SOMEONE SAYS, "MAYBE IF WE JUST TALKED ABOUT HOW WE'RE ALL THE SAME, WE WOULDN'T HAVE THESE PROBLEMS."

EXPLANATION: Talking about how we are the same is easy. Talking about how we are different is not. Although we *are* more the same than we are different, it is our differences that keep us isolated from each other. A willingness to have challenging conversations about cultural differences builds true respect and trust.

RESPONSE: "Even though it's difficult, talking about how we are different will help us better understand each other's experi-

ences. Otherwise our conversations will remain superficial and unproductive."

SOMEONE SAYS, "ALL THIS DIVERSITY STUFF IS TOO COMPLICATED FOR ME."

EXPLANATION: This statement often comes from individuals who are daunted by the ambiguity that comes from the discussion of cultural issues or are frightened of or resentful about change. "How am I supposed to know whether to call someone 'Black,' or 'African American,' or 'Latino,' or 'Hispanic?'" is a typical refrain. In fact, understanding diversity is complicated—but it is also achievable. An acceptance of ambiguity and individual differences is necessary for sorting out the complexities.

RESPONSE: "It is complicated, but keep at it."

SOMEONE SAYS, "I TREAT EVERYONE THE SAME."

EXPLANATION: People who make this statement usually mean that they try not to treat people unfairly based on race. But, this is not a one-size-fits-all world: we think, act, and feel differently based on all our experiences, including those that are cultural and racial. Unconscious prejudices still work against persons of color in jobs, housing, and social situations. In addition, treating everybody the same implies that we should ignore cultural differences. That minimizes the experiences of persons of color because they receive disparate racial treatment all the time.

RESPONSE: "I think that what you're really saying is that you try not to treat people badly because of their race. Treating people badly should be avoided, but treating people differently—but equitably—based on their cultural backgrounds may be necessary if you want to treat them with true respect."

SOMEONE SAYS, "YOU'RE JUST TOO SENSITIVE ABOUT RACIAL ISSUES."

EXPLANATION: This statement is usually directed at people of color, who are more aware of racial issues because such issues affect their lives with regularity and intensity.

RESPONSE: "Perhaps you're not sensitive enough about racial issues. We need to talk about why we have such differences in perception."

SOMEONE ASKS, "WHY ARE BLACK PEOPLE ALWAYS SO ANGRY?"

EXPLANATION: When black people talk about race, they often express feelings of anger associated with racism. Rather than retreating from the anger, white people should understand that anger is a natural response to unfair treatment. Using their own experiences of times when they have been angered because of mistreatment will go a long way to help them empathize with black people.

RESPONSE: "Like all people, black people become angry when they are treated badly. Try to recall what feelings of mistreatment have felt like in your own life. That may help you understand."

SOMEONE SAYS, "I'M ONLY ONE PERSON; THERE'S NOT MUCH I CAN DO."

EXPLANATION: Addressing racism can seem overwhelming, and there are times when it seems that the efforts of one individual are futile. But individuals striving for change make great differences in the lives of the people around them. Anti-racism work helps heal the effects of racism on those who are its victims. Although being an active anti-racist may feel lonely, you don't have to work alone. Forming alliances with groups and individuals can give you support in continuing your work.

RESPONSE: "One person can make a difference. You can make a difference in the lives of the people around you. Don't get discouraged."

SOMEONE SAYS, "WE SHOULD REALLY WORK ON THE CHILDREN. THEY ARE OUR FUTURE."

EXPLANATION: This comment is particularly irritating because it comes in the guise of extending help to young people—something that most people would never argue against. Helping young people is a necessary step in fighting racism. Nonetheless, this statement implies that children should be the sole targets of diversity work, and that adult work is unnecessary or hopeless. In fact, good work with children on anti-racism requires that the adults who teach them have done their own homework first.

RESPONSE: "As adults, let's do our own work first. Then we'll be better prepared to work with children."

SOMEONE SAYS, "I DON'T CARE IF PEOPLE ARE BLACK, WHITE, PURPLE, OR GREEN."

EXPLANATION: As far as we know, there are no purple, green, or polka dot people. This comment trivializes racial differences. It is an adoption of colorblindness in its worse sense because it doesn't take into account how racial differences drive personal experiences and institutional oppression. It also implies that conversations about racial and cultural differences are not worthwhile because, at the heart of things, everyone is the same. Although everyone does have universal "human" experiences, too often colorblindness is a demand for persons of color to put aside their cultural and racial experiences.

RESPONSE: "Race matters in the U.S., and we shouldn't trivialize its importance by comparing it to fictional persons who have skin colors that don't exist in nature."