

This hand-out is from the [Racial Healing Handbook: Practical Activities to Help You Challenge Privilege, Confront Systemic Racism, and Engage in Collective Healing](#) by Anneliese A. Singh, PhD, LPC

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE ANTIRACIST?

The term “antiracist” refers to people who are actively seeking not only to raise their consciousness about race and racism, but also to take action when they see racial power inequities in everyday life. Being an antiracist is much different from just being “nonracist,” as Black antiracist Marlon James (2016) made clear. Being a nonracist means you can have beliefs against racism, but when it comes to events like the murders of Black men by police, “you can watch things at home unfolding on TV, but not do a thing about it.” According to James, being an antiracist means that you are developing a different moral code, one that pairs a commitment to not being racist (whether verbalized or not) with action to protest and end the racist things you see in the world. I would add that saying you aren’t a racist isn’t enough to start healing from racism. You need the intentional mindset of *Yep, this racism thing is everyone’s problem—including mine, and I’m going to do something about it.*

Of course, being an antiracist is a different proposition for a person of color than it is for a White person. Let’s examine what an antiracist identity looks like on both sides of this binary.

## Becoming an Antiracist as a White Person

For White people, becoming an antiracist is a journey that evolves alongside your White racial identity. For instance, once you have moved out of obliviousness about your White privilege, you can move toward integrative awareness of what it means to be White and how to use your White privilege. The stages of using your White privilege to change your internalized racism and to interrupt racism when you see it are a big part of developing an antiracist identity. In her article “White Supremacy Culture: Changework,” Tema Okun (2006, 13) talked about antiracism based on her own journey as a White person taking on this identity. I slightly adapted her list of ways to be a White antiracist:

- See yourself as part of the White group.
- Understand and begin to take responsibility for your power and privilege as part of the white group—such as acknowledging the historical roots of White Supremacy and knowing that the White privilege you have as a result of that history is a real thing.
- Have all the feelings related to deepening relationships and increased multicultural experience— both the feelings of guilt, anger, or frustration that can sometimes arise in a racist system in which you experience privilege and the feelings of joy and connection to others that will emerge from pursuing diverse relationships and acting to protest and combat racism you encounter.
- Distinguish between your commitment to being a White antiracist and the part of you that wants to be a *perfect* antiracist—socialization is real, and racism is real, and you won’t always be perfectly antiracist.
- Know there will be hard things that come up when you explore White privilege. Learn to see these challenges as “teachers” and opportunities to learn more about your own Whiteness.

Instead of getting defensive when these challenges arise, lean into curiosity and cultivate desire for understanding and growth.

- Participate in individual and collective action against racism.
- Value self-reflection on your White identity.
- Use racist thoughts and behaviors you might engage in to deepen understanding and continue to change thoughts and behaviors.

Okun believes that White folks can take on six specific responsibilities to become antiracist in an ongoing process. Being an antiracist is not a one-time event or decision, or an identity you ever finally and fully achieve, but a commitment. Her six responsibilities will remind you of our earlier discussion of raising your race-consciousness through education and people resources. Below are Okun (2006)'s six Rs:

1. **Read** and educate yourself on the effects, impacts, and other structures of racism.
2. **Reflect** on what this education means for you as someone developing a White antiracist identity, such as identifying new ways to challenge everyday racism and work on racial justice initiatives.
3. **Remember** how you participate in the thoughts, beliefs, and actions that uphold racism, whether you intend to or not, and how you “forget” that racism exists. Identify internalized racial attitudes you have about people of color.
4. Take **risks** to challenge racism when you see it or realize when you are participating in it. Interrupt racial stereotypes when you hear them, and support people of color in your personal and professional settings when they speak out about their experiences with racism.
5. **Rejection** is something you'll experience as an antiracist, as sometimes you will make mistakes and “get it wrong” when it comes to identifying and challenging racism. Because of your White privilege, it will sometimes be tough to identify how something you are doing may be harmful to people of color. And people of color may reject what you are saying and even more so hold you accountable for these missteps. Learn to understand and accept rejection. People of color have justified anger about racism, and they may reject you or White people harshly because of it. If this happens, understand that this is the product of their treatment at the hands of a racist system. Don't take it personally; rather, help them if you can and continue to stay in the fight against racism.
6. **Relationship building** is a part of what you do along the way—with White folks and people of color who are somewhere on their journey from nonracist to antiracist.

Let's look at an example of what becoming a White antiracist using these six Rs looks like in the real world. Michael, a White, twenty-year-old college student, grew up in a homogenously White family and neighborhood and attended predominantly White schools. He moved to a racially diverse area for the first time when he went to college and had a roommate who was a person of color. Michael realized that people around him had experiences he didn't know much about, and that he himself could be behaving in ways that disrespected people of color in ways he might not even be realizing. Michael decided to take a college course on diversity in his first year and began working on learning more about his White privilege and how to become an antiracist. We can look at the steps he took in terms of Okun's six Rs:

1. Michael **read** and educated himself on what White privilege was. He considered the effects it had on his own life in terms of lost opportunities to interact with people of color and learn a

more truthful history of the world as it related to race and racism, and what it meant for people of color to lack such privilege. As he read and educated himself, he learned about the impacts of racism on other racial groups and how structures of racism are upheld in current times.

2. Michael began to **reflect** on what this education meant for him. He wanted to cast aside the obliviousness he had about racism and White privilege. He knew that being an antiracist would mean identifying ways he had previously ignored everyday racism that people of color experienced (e.g., he remembered the one Latinx student in his middle school class being called racial epithets and not realizing how these were racist acts) and racial microaggressions he had enacted (e.g., assuming Asian Americans were recent immigrants). He joined an antiracist campus group, where he and other folks with White privilege could interrupt everyday racism and work on larger campus racial justice initiatives.
3. Michael made sure to **remember** throughout his antiracist work that he would inevitably “forget” about racism and its systems because that is how racism works. He kept educating himself on the different ways White privilege can show up (e.g., feeling guilty about racism, not having to think about race, not being extraordinarily worried when pulled over by police for a traffic ticket, not knowing the history of the land his campus was on and who the indigenous peoples were). He also intentionally explored negative racial stereotypes he still held about people of color and sought to expand the diversity of people in his life.
4. Michael took **risks** to challenge racism when he saw it in his classes, like when his professors wouldn’t call on his fellow students of color. He also assumed a leadership role in his residence hall, and he challenged his fellow White student leaders to think about how their racial privilege influenced selection of programming for their dorm.
5. Michel knew to expect **rejection** from people of color when he made a racist assumption or was misusing his White privilege. For instance, sometimes he was so excited about his efforts to be an antiracist, he would talk over people of color doing similar work and minimize their contributions. He learned to apologize as soon as he noticed this was happening or when a person of color brought this to his attention. He learned not only to welcome the feedback he would get from people of color when he had a misstep, but also to value this feedback as a way to grow as a White antiracist.
6. **Relationship building** was the major focus of what Michael did throughout each of the previous steps. He learned to make connections with White folks who wanted to externalize their racially stereotyped notions of the world and to build relationships with people of color. Through relationship building, Michael eventually had a vibrant, diverse group of people in his life who could not only support and inspire him in his antiracist identity development, but also hold him accountable for his missteps and growth.

You can see that becoming an antiracist is an ongoing practice and process, exactly opposite of color blindness. You want to be able to see and identify everything about racism. You want to know what your part in racism is. You continuously raise your race-consciousness. And you do this alongside a multitude of different types of people on the same journey. You expect the feelings of anger, frustration, sadness, rage, irritation, grief, and other emotions as you challenge racism, as we discussed in chapter 4.

### **Becoming an Antiracist as a Person of Color**

People of color can also claim an antiracist identity, with all that this entails: consciousness of race and racism as it manifests in the world, and a commitment to speak out and act against racism they

encounter in the world. Remember, for people of color, that first stage of racial identity development is often obliviousness about racism existing, which lasts until that first critical incident of being the target of a racist act or idea. Once people of color become aware of racism, however, they become capable of having negative ideas about the races of other people of color. This is exactly the kind of behavior that claiming and living an antiracist life can help you challenge. For example, there are plenty of opportunities for me to apply Okun's antiracist steps with people in my Indian American and South Asian community who hold negative racial attitudes about other people of color groups.

Why does this within-group racism exist? Well, the roots are in how colonization has been internalized. British colonization of South Asian lands made it imperative that people in those lands adopt the values and ways of life that the British set for them in order to survive. This left many brown folks with the internalized notion that White culture and White values were the civilized and highly regarded ones to emulate—and that people who are deemed aberrant by White colonizers' values, like Black people, are to be denigrated. You may have also noticed that Black folks may have negative ideas about Asian Americans, and vice versa. Well, people of Asian heritage enter a US racial context where Black people were enslaved, denigrated, and seen as inferior. Black people learn—like most US citizens—very little about people of Asian heritage, except that they represent something that is foreign and a threat (as discussed in chapter 3). This is especially true of Asian Americans who don't speak English and maintain traditions from their home cultures. It can be so frustrating—and infuriating—to see people of color groups tear one another down!

Developing an antiracist identity as people of color means recognizing that all racial groups are struggling in some way under White supremacy. It means recognizing that people of color groups are not always united in solidarity under a larger umbrella of people of color. Misinformation, prejudice, and harm can exist between people of color groups, and these need to be confronted just as White racism must be challenged. This means knowing how different enslavement and immigration histories you learned about in chapter 3 influence the different histories of oppression each racial group has. This also means recognizing there are important class differences that can have a big impact on the degree of oppression people of color experience (class privilege can buffer experiences of racism, as you will explore in chapter 8).

You can take action and challenge internalized White supremacy by interrupting the patterns in which people of color of one racial group hold prejudices against another racial group. You can speak up when someone in your family or work setting expresses such a sentiment (see chapter 7 for more on doing this). By doing things like this on an individual and systemic level, you can create solidarity with other racial groups while acknowledging the important differences in how racism is meted out across racial groups. Further, in doing so, you can create the possibility of collective action against racism on multiple individual and systemic levels. For example, you can talk with people across racial groups and collectively identify the differences and similarities racism has on all racial groups. Then, people of color can focus more effectively on challenging White supremacy as a larger collective (more on this in chapter 10).

For people of color, Okun's (2006) list of antiracist principles still applies. But I would tweak it a bit to ensure that you as a person of color are examining the specific biases you have internalized about other racial groups and your own, as I've described below:

1. **Read** and educate yourself on the effects, impacts, and other structures of racism—both on your racial group and on other groups.
2. **Reflect** on what this education means for you as someone developing an antiracist identity.
3. **Remember** how you might be participating in thoughts, beliefs, and actions that uphold racism. Identify the negative beliefs you have internalized about your own race and even apply to other people of color. Think about how you are complicit with racism when racist events are happening—ways you don't speak up for yourself and others.
4. Take **risks** to challenge racism when you see it or realize when you are participating in it.
5. Understand the anger that you and people of other racial groups may have about racism, express your **rejection** of racism from White people, and continue to stay in the fight against racism with a clear understanding of what privileges or disadvantages you may have relative to people of other racial groups. It's okay to be angry about racism—it has hurt you and lots of other people you care about. Turn the anger you have into energy to challenge racism and hold White people accountable for their own racism. (To be clear, in general it isn't your job to hold White folks accountable, but it is an important aspect of being an antiracist person of color.) Keep in mind you have internalized White supremacist notions about your own race and others, so keep a lookout for how those internalized attitudes show up and provide an obstacle to your joining forces with other people of color groups.
6. Engage in **relationship building** with people of color and White folks alike who are on their journey from nonracist to antiracist.

Here's an example of what the six Rs look like for a person of color seeking to be an antiracist. Jasmine is a thirty-three-year-old Native American who recently moved to the west coast from North Dakota to work in a technology start-up company. After the 2016 presidential election, she got more involved in antiracism work. She was particularly moved by the water protectors at Standing Rock protesting against the construction of the Keystone pipeline, and wanted to learn about racial justice.

Let's look at Jasmine's six Rs:

1. Jasmine began to **read** and educate herself on how White supremacy influenced her own Native American tribe and other people of color. She knew about the Black Lives Matter movement, but she had not learned much in her schools about Black history. Jasmine began to read books about the enslavement of Black people and Jim Crow laws. As she read these histories, Jasmine drew parallels between the racism experiences of Black and Native American communities (e.g., stolen land and property, erasure of indigenous cultures and spiritualities). She also read about Black leaders in the civil rights movement, who reminded her of elders in her own tribe who advocated for better resources for her community.
2. Jasmine began to **reflect** on what her (re)education meant for her as a person of color developing an antiracist identity. She paid attention to the different emotions that came up as she read about her tribe and about the experiences of Black people under racism, and she began to talk to other people in her tribe who wanted to learn how to more effectively challenge racism when they noticed it.
3. Jasmine sought to **remember** how her internalized negative beliefs about herself as a Native American and person of color influenced how she felt about herself. She noticed she wouldn't speak up much at work when she had an idea, and she also noticed that other people of color

had difficulty being heard when they did speak. She began to notice the opportunities where she could challenge these instances of racism at her workplace.

4. Eventually, Jasmine also took **risks** to interrupt racism at work, and she began to notice racism in everyday life more and more. She noticed that when women of color at her work spoke up, White leaders would often subtly discount their ideas. Jasmine also noticed how sports teams in her city used Native American symbols as mascots. She talked with people she trusted about what she could do in these situations to fight against racism.
5. Jasmine worked with several community groups doing antiracist work, and sometimes she would express her rejection of the ideas White people had about how to do the work. They had good ideas, but sometimes the way they expressed what the group's goals should be didn't seem to center the experiences of non-White people as it should have. She expressed herself and felt better just knowing she said something important that she felt.
6. She also began **relationship building** beyond her tribe, intentionally seeking to connect with people of color and White people who were doing antiracist work. In these relationships, she could ask questions about how to confront subtle racism and she could join in initiatives to challenge systemic racism.

By taking the steps above, you learn to recognize more subtle forms of racism, like whose ideas are valued in a meeting and whose are not. You start to realize that many historical landmarks and buildings are named for White people, and rarely for people of color. You notice that you don't see overt racism often, but that the majority of physicians, lawyers, and educators you know are White. And you learn in each of these situations to connect your realizations to some type of action—from educating yourself and others to advocacy and interruption. This continual work is exhausting. If you don't take care of yourself as you do it—stepping back from the flow of your antiracist work from time to time for sleep, water, a healthy meal, friend time, alone time, vacation—it will be difficult to sustain your consciousness-raising efforts. I'll refer back to Marlon James (2016) and say that this does not mean reverting to being a nonracist and doing nothing. Now that you've seen what the six Rs would look like for White and people of color antiracists, I would add a seventh "R" to Okun's list: "(Rest)ore." (Rest)ore means that you understand that being an antiracist requires sustainability, so you find ways to rest when you need to, restore your energy, and nourish yourself in reflection before diving into the work again. See the next Racial Healing Practice to explore where you are in your own antiracist development.

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