

## 16 BRIDGE-BUILDING TIPS FOR WHITE AMERICANS

*With the current focus on issues of social justice in America, many white people find themselves wanting to help build racial equality but at a loss for what to do or say. By having open hearts and minds, with a commitment to making personal changes, each of us can have a ripple effect on society at-large to battle seen and unseen systemic racism and social injustices. These tips, adapted from "[Be The Bridge](#)," can help with difficult conversations between white people and people of color.*

1. **Do your own research.** Too often, people of color (POC) are expected to educate others about race, but it is exhausting to repeatedly explain the same ideas every time a white person joins the conversation. Instead, read a book (or several), watch a documentary, and Google terms and ideas that are unfamiliar.
2. **Elevate the voices of people of color.** Avoid taking up too much "space" in the conversation, which can be a challenge for those who are verbal processors. We each have important things to say, but the ideas and stories of white people are prioritized everywhere. Take this opportunity to quietly listen and actively learn about the experiences of the marginalized in our society.
3. **Understand that experiences of oppression vary.** Although you might see similarities between your circumstances, resist the urge to interpret the experiences of black, indigenous, or other people of color's experience through your own lens. Your suffering is real, and it might help you feel more connected to or empathetic toward your friend of color. However, your experiences are not the same. Seek to understand.
4. **Actively listen.** Do not explain racism to a POC. To explain away someone as just "being nice" or that particular injustices are more about class than race is an easy trap to fall into.
5. **Focus on the problem.** Don't make the conversation about you. Avoid shifting the focus to your feelings away from the true problem – racism and inequality. Have an open mind concerning where the source of the issues being explained may originate.
6. **Mistakes will happen; humbly apologize.** Impact does not equate to intent. While your heart may have been in the right place and you meant well, words or behaviors can have a negative impact on those around you, and that is what matters. Despite the best of intentions, as you navigate conversations of race, you will make missteps and hurt someone. Humbly apologize and do better next time rather than trying to justify yourself.

7. **Take their word for it.** The experiences and opinions of POC are diverse. Don't demand proof of a POC's lived experience or try to counter their narrative with the experience of another person of color. Keep in mind, just because one person of color doesn't feel oppressed does not mean that systemic, institutional racism is not real. Avoid explaining away POC's experience of oppression by playing devil's advocate or providing alternative explanations. Consider instead asking a follow-up question, such as, "How did that make you feel?"

8. **If what you are about to say starts with "Not all..." , don't say it.** Conversations about race and racism are about systems, institutions, and ideologies more than individuals. Though this is contrary to white cultural norms, it is not helpful or necessary to force the conversation to fit culture. There will always be "good" examples that fall outside generalizations, but do not derail the conversation by bringing up the exceptions when discussing the rules.

9. **Avoid victim blaming.** The classic trope that behavior modification on the part of POC would eliminate racism is simply false. Asking POC to change their choices in dress, music, or speech is not the right solution. Shifting from biological racism ("POC are inherently inferior") to cultural racism ("POC are culturally inferior") – expecting black, indigenous, and people of color to act more in line with white cultural norms – is not a fair demand.

10. **Provide space for POC to wail and lament.** When POC express their grief, fear, or anger, you may feel uncomfortable, but do not dismiss their message. Understand that, historically, voices of dissent have been silenced with the cultural ideal of "niceness." Jesus didn't hold back when he saw hypocrisy and oppression; POC are free to voice their true experiences without judgment.

11. **Recognize that being a POC in America is different.** Don't attempt to equate your experiences visiting, serving, or living overseas with the experience of being a POC in America. You may have been a minority in your setting, but it is not an equivalent experience. There are different dynamics at play for people of color in America. Notably, racism against POC is not unique to America, but rather a worldwide phenomenon.

12. **Your words have power.** Choose your words carefully to avoid inflicting real, lasting damage in these conversations. Melanin is not a protective shield. Decide to be a balm instead of a battering ram.

13. **Remember, racism is our problem.** People created and sustained it, and now it's our job to dismantle it. Only by the grace and mercy of God are POC willing to walk this road together toward racial healing and reconciliation. Honor that reality in how you treat those with whom you want to build bridges.

14. **Provide a safe haven for real conversation.** Don't get defensive if a person of color tells you that your words/tone/behavior are racist/oppressive/triggering. Instead, stop. Don't try to explain yourself (see #6). It does not edify the conversation by being passive-aggressive, sarcastic, or leaving abruptly. (If helpful, inconspicuously step outside/go to the restroom and take a deep breath.) Remain cognizant of the dynamics of your own sensitive feelings, and take note of how it shows up in you.

When you get defensive or leave the conversation, you reinforce to people of color that white people are not a safe people with whom to have this conversation.

15. **Never give up.** This will be a hard, lifelong process. It is a marathon and not a sprint. Take care of yourself. Find commUNITY. Take time out to disconnect and process. Then, come back and work again tomorrow. People of color don't get to step out of their skin and walk away. Remain in solidarity, even when it's uncomfortable and harder than you imagined it could be.

16. **Keep the faith.** Abide in the Word. Pray. Laugh. Cry. Yell. Sit quietly. Sing. Dance. Remember that our hope is in Jesus, who is present, who sees all, and who grieves most deeply over racial oppression.