

#BlackLivesMatter Response - How to Guide Series

How to be a good ally

Notes from Kerena Sheath's presentation on 17 June 2020

This 'how to guide' is written from a UK perspective on racial inequality, but lots of this advice can be applied to other contexts.

1. LISTEN AND LEARN

When it comes to Black Lives Matter, and other conversations about race, then unless you are black, you will never fully understand the experience of living as a black person. Therefore, when someone takes the time to share their experiences with you, the best thing you can do is to listen and accept what they are telling you.

All too often, after sharing an experience, they will hear phrases like *'oh I'm sure you were imagining it'* or, *'they didn't mean it like that'* or, *'why are you so sensitive all the time?'* or *'not everything is about race you know!'*

But that is actually the least helpful response - unless you are the person living that experience, then you don't get to tell black people how to feel or react. It's our responsibility to listen, and therefore begin to understand more about what life is like for our black friends and colleagues.

Ben Lindsay, a pastor of a church in South East London, posted this quote online (it's unclear who originally said this):

'When you debate a person about something that affects *them* more than it affects you, remember that it will take a much greater emotional toll on them than on you. For you, it may feel like an academic exercise, for them it feels like revealing their pain, only to have you dismiss their experience and sometimes, their humanity. The fact that you remain more calm under these circumstances is a consequence of your privilege, not increased objectivity on your part.'

2. TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

Take responsibility for educating yourself. There are so many resources out there that can help you begin this process. Listen to podcasts with black hosts, watch movies with black lead actors, read books by black authors, or articles by black writers.

There is a huge amount of content out there to help you understand the history of race, how that history led us to where we are now, and the impact that history has on the black community in the UK today. There is a ridiculous amount of black history that we just aren't taught, but is hugely important to black people's experience (and ours!).

But this isn't just history, it's things that still happen every day. Racism may manifest itself in slightly different ways now, but it is by no means any less dangerous. So learn about it. Learn about systemic racism, learn about structural inequalities and learn the things that *you* can do to help.

But don't rely on your black friends, colleagues or those from marginalised groups to do this work for you - it's not their job and it's too exhausting. Yes, it is good to have frank and honest conversations with your black friends - but check in with them first, they might not always have the mental capacity or energy to have those with you and you shouldn't count on it. Especially when it's literally as easy as googling 'how to be a Black Lives Matter ally'!

3. ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR PRIVILEGE

If you are a white person, then you will need to learn about, and then acknowledge the privilege that comes with that.

This is a big one, and it can be really uncomfortable work, but it is so important. Once you have begun the work of educating yourself and you are able to understand systemic racism and the impact it has on the black community, then you will need to take some time to examine yourself and any things you may have done that contribute towards this...and then commit to changing your behaviour in the future.

This is not easy, and it can be painful. It is also really easy to feel defensive when confronted with your own privilege. But examining it doesn't mean that all your achievements mean nothing, it doesn't mean that you didn't work hard to get where you are, and it doesn't mean that you haven't faced hard times, it just means that the colour of your skin was not an additional barrier you had to get over in order to get there.

This can also apply if you are part of a mainstream group in a country where the majority of citizens are from one racial group but there are many ethnicities.

4. SPEAK UP

There are times when another white voice is not needed in this space, when the best thing you can do is stay quiet and listen.

But black people, and other people of colour are *tired*. It's exhausting constantly trying to make the point that you 'matter', of having to protest and grieve the death of *another* person, of seeing a hashtag begin and a video being shared and wondering who it is this time. It is exhausting having to have these conversations with friends, colleagues or family members who don't always really get it - and having to do the work of educating them while at the same time trying to process their own grief and emotions.

And so in these times, it's up to us to keep speaking. To keep the conversation going past the initial media coverage and hashtags. To show that we aren't just jumping on the bandwagon, but that we are in this for the long haul. That we are going to put the work in and keep speaking out against this injustice.

There are probably also going to be times when you are in a room full of white people that some of those people might feel more comfortable saying things they wouldn't if another person of colour was present. At that point - are you going to speak up? Are you going to challenge that person? They might be your best friend, they might be a colleague, a family member or even a complete stranger - but that is the moment when your voice is needed most.

There is some great advice online you can access on what to do in these situations. Accounts like @everydayracism_ have shared [lots of helpful things to say](#) when someone makes a racist joke or comment in your presence.

E.g. 'would you mind explaining why that is funny?'
'could you clarify what you meant by that?'
'what you said made me feel really uncomfortable because...'

Sometimes, it might get uncomfortable...good! People should feel uncomfortable making racist and inappropriate remarks! If they are continually called out everytime they say something like that, then hopefully that will lead to a change of behaviour.

The final thing to say is not really a tip, but it's just as important.

You don't get to call yourself an ally.

The people that you are allying for are the ones that decide if your actions are the actions of an ally. There might be times that you have the best of intentions, but your black friends might tell you that you've missed the mark. In those moments, it's important that we don't get defensive, but that we take that moment as a learning opportunity to do better in the future.

We have to remember that it's not about us - at all. There is no set list of things you can tick off, and then at the end you can put 'ally' in your email signature. It's a choice you have to make every day.

- When you hear someone make an inappropriate comment - will you speak up and be an ally?
- When you see your black friends and colleagues hurting - will you check in with them and be an ally?
- When you see privilege in action - will you step in and be an ally?

- When you find yourself directly benefiting from privilege - will you still choose to be an ally?