



## The Role of White People in Ending Racism

Racism is contrary to the fundamental nature of every human being. All human beings begin life caring deeply about all other human beings. Until we ourselves are hurt—put down, ignored, threatened, beaten, criticized, isolated, and so on—each of us wants all people to be treated well. None of us, including people of European heritage, white people, would ever participate in the racist mistreatment or oppression of other humans unless we had first been hurt. However, once hurt, we are vulnerable to hurting others—by participating in oppressive systems and acting oppressively as individuals.

In an oppressive society, no one escapes being hurt in ways that leave us feeling scared and bad about ourselves. It is when we are scared or when we feel bad about ourselves that we are most vulnerable to believing racist messages.

In a racist society there is a constant barrage of racist messages and practices—from family, friends, acquaintances, schools, the media, and other societal institutions. No one can grow up in such an environment and escape its effects. In this way the society installs racism on every white

person. It does so regardless of how strongly or for how long we actively resist.

### WHITE PEOPLE ACT AS AGENTS OF RACISM

As a result of these hurts, all white people have been overwhelmed by the lies and misinformation of racism and in that way conditioned to carry racist feelings. Some white people stop questioning these feelings and act out these “beliefs” in overtly hateful and oppressive ways. Other white people intellectually reject the content of racist messages and try to treat people targeted by racism respectfully and as equals. But even when those of us who are white act with goodwill toward people targeted by racism or actively engage in fighting racism, attitudes and behavior connected with racism (unjustified fears, the seeking of approval, feelings of superiority, dominating, and so on) surface and must be battled in order for us to act consistently according to our best thinking.

We white people are pulled to act on the basis of the racism we’ve heard and seen, acting sometimes subtly and unwaresly and other times overtly and harshly.



## **RACISM HURTS WHITE PEOPLE**

Racism greatly damages the lives of people targeted by it. Racism also hurts those of us who are not targeted by racism, people of European heritage. (This is true of any group that acts out oppression at another group.) This is far from the damage inflicted on those targeted by racism, but it corrupts white people's humanity and compounds the ways we already are confused about and feel bad about ourselves. Not standing up against racism continues to erode our integrity and undermines our sense of goodness and self-worth.

Racism deeply confuses white people from very early in our lives. To live in a society where our "white" ways of acting, thinking, relating to others, and so on, are seen as correct, superior, and normal greatly damages our understandings of the world and the people in it. These ways permeate and dominate every societal institution and all cultural forms of society. It's a big challenge to get our minds free of this distortion of reality.

White people become separated from the majority of the world's people, know little about them, and miss close involvement in the lives of a rich variety of people. This keeps us ignorant about much of how the world operates and limited in how to build a just society.

Racism also erodes relationships between white people—we do not want to be associated with "that white racist" or "that white liberal." Witnessing our white parents, caretakers, teachers, and others act out racist feelings is deeply terrifying and damages our trust in and relationships with the people we looked to for information about the world. We are left feeling hopeless about actually

eliminating racism and creating a just and equitable society. All of this greatly limits our ability to build a united group of white people to work together to eliminate racism. We struggle with lack of trust, criticizing and targeting each other, and abandoning each other. We do need to address racism with each other, and we can do so in thoughtful and caring ways instead of being harsh and condemning. In that way we will be more able to build a strong, united force of white people to work alongside of and be led by people targeted by racism.

## **WHITE PEOPLE HEALING FROM THE HURTS OF WHITE RACISM**

United to End Racism (UER) and Re-evaluation Counseling have valuable experience and tools for white people to use in ending racism. We have learned that any and all "oppressor roles" (the role played by a person who has been conditioned to be agents of oppression) are installed by hurting people very deeply. White people's sometimes unintentional oppressive behavior arises from deep emotional damage. Sustained emotional work is therefore required for those of us who are white to free ourselves from racism. To create a just society, white people must not only inform ourselves fully about racism and take action to end it, but must also heal from the damage to ourselves caused by being exposed to racism and by having participated in it.

UER has found that white people taking turns listening to each other in pairs and in groups is an effective way to do this emotional work. Those of us of European heritage need to remember and tell our stories about the racism in our lives and assist one another to release the intense feelings that underlie these stories. These stories can include early experiences with racism, the racist lies we were told, the times we joined in acting out racism, and the racist attitudes that were held by the people around us, as well as the successes we've had in fighting racism. Sometimes these stories are buried under "I don't remember" or "nothing happened" but with enough respectful, warm and thoughtful listening they do

surface. Our society works very hard at covering up racism and its effects. Racism is attributed to individual flaws and faults rather than it being systemically imbedded in all our institutions and infecting every individual.

To do this work, we white people need settings in which we can be open about racism without being blamed or shamed, where we know we are cared about and respected. Under these conditions, we can remember and tell what happened to us with regard to racism and release the painful emotions from these experiences. And we need to learn to do this work with one another as white people. It is the job of white people, not people targeted by racism, to do the work to both stop ourselves from perpetuating racism and to help us heal the damage we carry.

With emotional release, white people are able to think afresh about these experiences. We become partners with people targeted by racism in their efforts to heal from having lived in a racist society. We begin taking effective steps to end racism along with freeing ourselves of the effects of racism, all of which improves our lives in countless ways.

## **WHITE PEOPLE AS ALLIES TO PEOPLE TARGETED BY RACISM**

An important part of ending racism and all other oppressions is to develop alliances between those targeted by the oppression and those outside the targeted group. Eliminating racism requires the development of strong alliances among groups of people targeted by racism, and also with white people who are committed to ending racism. These white allies are people who have decided to work for the liberation of all people targeted by racism. We, white people in this ally role, demonstrate by our actions and words that we support the goals and visions of groups targeted by racism and work alongside them. In UER, we have learned a great deal about building these alliances and about white people becoming effective allies.

## **STEPS TOWARD BECOMING WHITE ALLIES**

There are many ways for white people to be allies in eliminating racism. Some of these include:

- ❖ Taking visible stands against all forms of racism by both backing anti-racism organizations led by people targeted by racism as well as standing independently as a white person against racism
- ❖ Working on and eliminating our own racism and healing the places we have been silent and passive about racism
- ❖ Standing against one of the effects of racism by reminding targeted people of their goodness, intelligence, competence, and the importance of their relationships with one another
- ❖ Actively seeking correct information and healing from the ways we have been unaware and uninformed
- ❖ Building a life that contradicts racism which includes having us in close contact with and building long-term friendships with people targeted by racism and challenging the racist messages of superiority, separation, difference, and fear
- ❖ Training and building groups of white allies committed to eliminating racism by assisting other whites to heal the damage done to us by racism
- ❖ Understanding that being allies to people targeted by racism is for our own benefit since it involves reclaiming our full humanity and having a world right for everyone, a world where everyone matters

For more information about white people healing the damage done by racism, see the pamphlet *Working Together to End Racism*, a publication of United to End Racism.





## UNITED TO END RACISM

United to End Racism (UER) is a group of people of many racial groups and all ages and backgrounds in many different countries who are dedicated to eliminating racism in the world. We understand that the elimination of racism is necessary for humankind to progress. We are committed to ending racism, and we support the efforts of other groups to accomplish this goal.

United to End Racism is a project of the Re-evaluation Counseling Communities, and all of the members of UER have learned and use the theory and tools of Re-evaluation Counseling. Re-evaluation Counseling (RC) has existed since the early 1950's, and the RC Communities have directly taken on the work of eliminating racism since the 1970's. In the late 1990's the RC Communities decided to make the elimination of racism central to their work, and subsequently United to End Racism was created.

The main work of UER is to illuminate the damage done to individuals by racism and to undo this damage on an individual basis, using the resources and process of Re-evaluation Counseling. As people do this work, they become better able:

- ❖ to interrupt racism in their daily lives,
- ❖ to free themselves from all of racism's effects,
- ❖ to take leadership,
- ❖ to form deep relationships across racial lines,
- ❖ to remove racism from our societies' institutions, and
- ❖ to support the work of other individuals and organizations in ending racism.

United to End Racism offers both an ongoing support system that assists people to sustain their efforts to eliminate racism, and effective tools for the elimination of racism that can be taught and used on a one-to-one basis.