# Can We Talk?

HIV-positive advocate Art Jackson is a community programmer and educator at Community Health Interventions and Sickle Cell Agency in North Carolina. Below is an edited excerpt of his opinion piece titled "Can We Talk?"

February 13, 2017 By Art Jackson

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While I was thinking about 2017, the Joan Rivers catchphrase "Can we talk?" came to mind. Lately it seems impossible to have open and honest conversations. The HIV community will face many challenges with the Trump administration, so it's imperative we put some issues to rest.

Can we talk about racism, privilege, cultural competency, respect, bias and hate without personal attacks? Can we talk about the fact that racism is still alive in America without our white brothers and sisters feeling attacked? Can we talk about the fact that this election put many of us on edge? Not everyone who voted for Trump is racist, but can we talk about the fact that his campaign did appeal to many who are?

Can we talk about the diluting of race issues by some in the Black community who make everything into an issue of race, when sometimes we must look internally? Can we talk about unjust police actions without holding all police accountable for the actions of some? Can we talk about the need for all government officials to stop protecting unjust police?

Can we talk about HIV/AIDS and its devastating effects on all communities, especially the Black community? Can we talk about how disappointed we are in the Black church, historically Black colleges and universities, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and other groups for not engaging in this fight on the level that they should have? Can we talk about sexuality, religion, stigma, bias and fear without condemnation and bitterness?

Can we talk about these things without forcing others to give up their beliefs but by asking them to seek their humanity in understanding and seeing others? Can we have dialogue that produces tangible change without feeling as if we've lost something in the process?

Can we talk about the soft bigotry that still permeates many AIDS service organizations that continue to engage in actions that have been detrimental to communities of color? Can we talk about how we expect these organizations to bring about real change and policies that increase diversity and increase the ability for our communities to finally implement policies, practices and procedures that will impact us in a more efficient manner and produce lasting results?

Can we talk about Black heterosexual men and their lack of a seat at the HIV/AIDS table without gay men and Black women feeling slighted? Can we talk about inclusive conversations and funding without one group feeling slighted or left out? Can we talk about transgender folks and their lack of inclusion, funding and access to care by understanding that our own biases and actions may have led to their pain?

Can we talk about pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and all its wonders but also talk about how it has failed to reach the communities most in need of it? Can we talk about how PrEP campaigns have failed to use the great resources at their disposal, i.e. the amazing advocates in this country who know this disease better than anyone and who, with training and education, could be the perfect ambassadors to promote PrEP?

Can we talk to those who have been engaged in the fight for years and say we love you and respect you but also want you to allow those who want to shake things up a bit to sit at the table? Can we talk about how the South has been ignored long enough?

I hope that we can talk about all these things because we need to act now and work together to end this epidemic. Enough is enough!

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