Dear (Other) White People*: Racism Is a Public Health Crisis – and It Is on Us

This is a call-to-action to other white people: ***stop looking away, stop hiding, and start being part of the change. We need to fix the problems we created and the systems of injustice from which we benefit.*** In the words of Angela Davis: "It is not enough to be non-racist. We must be ANTI-racist."

June 5, 2020 By The Well Project

This post was written by Krista Martel, executive director of The Well Project, and originally appeared on A Girl Like Me.

> "The fact that I have a better chance of dying at the hands of police than of HIV makes this a Public Health crisis, too!" – Deondre Moore (Board of Director, Prevention Access Campaign, Source Facebook)

Dear Other White People,

For the past several days I have been operating both in a muddy fog and with a racing heart – the heavy pit in my stomach growing with the news of George Floyd's horrific murder by cops and Amy Cooper's weaponizing of her tears against a Black man who asked her to keep her dog from hurting birds. If I am feeling such a constant sense of outrage that I can barely focus, I cannot begin to imagine the depths of trauma and grief being experienced by Floyd's family, the loved ones of other Black and Brown people slain by police, and virtually every Black and Brown person in the United States.

So here I am, trying to put pen to paper, as a white woman of extreme privilege, running an organization that addresses and works to fight HIV – a disease very much affected and complicated by racism and racial disparities – amidst the COVID-19 crisis, a pandemic that is further illuminating the racial inequities and racism in our healthcare system and government. I do so knowing that my words may be messy (I am not an expert or a writer by trade). But it is also my responsibility to speak up – to speak to you – because the failures in our systems that continually oppress and kill Black and Brown people are not up to them to fix. Dear white people – this is on us.

I want to start by acknowledging the pain and anger in Black and Brown communities – towards these systems and towards white people, because the individual actions of even the most engaged, actively listening white people will never be enough. I include myself here, having

worked to counter the effects of institutional and structural racism on the lives of members of my community while simultaneously benefiting from them my whole life.

This is a call-to-action to other white people: stop looking away, stop hiding, and start being part of the change. We need to fix the problems we created and the systems of injustice from which we benefit. In the words of Angela Davis: "It is not enough to be non-racist. We must be ANTI-racist."

If this is new to you, you will very likely feel uncomfortable. At some point, you will probably say the wrong thing. And guess what? Someone might even call you out for it. Whatever discomfort you might feel, though, is nothing compared to simply existing as a Black trans or cis man, woman, boy, or girl in the United States – every single day. And remember what we tell children: Making mistakes is how we learn. The next time you speak out (because you need to do it over and over again), chances are you will not make the same mistake.

I also really (like really, really, really) beg of you to overcome any urge you may have to dismiss the discussion around white privilege. The Well Project's fact sheet on Why Race Matters: Women and HIV does an amazing job of breaking down what racial privilege is and the importance of thinking critically about it, including addressing issues of class and wealth/poverty. One stark illustration of privilege confronting us today is the heavily armed, angry white protesters storming state capitals and defying COVID-19 social distancing rules who walk away unscathed and unpoliced, while Black and Brown people are being killed for doing everyday activities like jogging (#AmaudArbery), relaxing or sleeping in the comfort of their own home (#BreonnaTaylor, #BothamJean, and #AtatianaJefferson), playing with a toy (#TamirRice), walking home with Skittles (#TrayvonMartin), and the too-long list goes on … and on.

White privilege is also:

- Not having to go through exercises with your 11- or 12-year-old son on how *not* to get shot by the police during a traffic stop.
- Not having to sing the words "I just want to live" because, well, just because. At this point, I hope I don't need to explain.

As parents to white children, it is our job to take the time to talk about their privilege and the importance of using it to improve systems and oppose injustice. Are these fun dinner conversations? Maybe not, but they are steps that we need to take in order to change the conditions that require parents of Black children to engage in the kinds of conversations with their kids that are noted above. Again, dealing with these kinds of uncomfortable conversations and experiences is nothing compared to living in a society that systemically and openly dehumanizes you. Continue reading...

The Well Project is a non-profit organization whose mission is to change the course of the HIV/AIDS pandemic through a unique and comprehensive focus on women and girls. Visit their website, www.thewellproject.org, to access fact sheets (English and Spanish), blogs, and advocacy tools,

and to join a global community of women living with HIV.

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