



*“Approaching the topic of racism may not be easy. It can generate empathy, concern, and compassion as much as it can stir defensiveness, anger, hostility and a wide host of reactions that lie along this continuum. Approaching racism requires us to bring our most compassionate and mindful selves, to suspend emotional reactivity so that we can remain open to viewing the world from the perspective of others, and to remember that we belong to each other.” ~Reaching Teens, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition p. 307*

### **Approaching Racism with Compassion and Humility**

Regardless of exposure to other ACEs or their socioeconomic status, children and adolescents of color *all* have exposure to the trauma that comes from navigating a world with implicit biases and structural forces that perpetuate inequities. This means that while any child can be exposed to suffering, the intersectionality of the added force of discrimination and the low expectations associated with implicit biases mean that we need to be intentional about focusing our attention on these negative forces and their impact. Race alone forces underrepresented people of color to navigate the world with a constant state of vigilance.

Just as we recognize the challenges that people have suffered because of trauma exposure, we must simultaneously recognize all their strengths, including their resilience. Many people who have the hardest lives also possess the deepest levels of compassion and unwavering commitment to lifting others up. We must see people as they deserve to be seen and take great care not to apply labels to them related only to the hardships they have endured. We must honor all the things that they have conquered despite these external forces and recognizing their experiences and relational strengths as successes.

(Above excerpted from Chapter 42, Reaching Teens 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)

All staff members, whether they themselves are persons of color or not, have a role and responsibility to play in supporting students and families managing the toxic stress of systemic racism and responding to needs in times of acute racially motivated violence.

#### **All staff can:**

- Bear witness. Recognize that community connection is our greatest asset in times of crisis. Fostering positive relationships and connections starts with us!
  - Listen and validate thoughts, reactions and experiences.
  - Employ active listening with a mindful intent and use all your senses to be fully present when students talk about their painful experiences.
  - Avoid offering simple solutions to complex problems.
  - Employ your full presence and empathy to really listen and deepen the experience of connection.
  - Recognize that individuals, including your students, are experts in their own lives.
- Support psychological/physical safety, sustain connections/relationships, help all students with skills and resource on how to cope with strong emotions (ability to name them, how to settle them)

- Ask what is needed – don't assume you know
- Learn from others. What are your own blind spots? Access formal and informal supports to gain knowledge and investigate yourself and your own biases. Increase your ability to identify, acknowledge and manage your own implicit biases
- Educate others. What is your circle of influence in your personal and professional life? Be an advocate for change and take anti-oppressive actions.
- Model how equitable societies should work & provide hope
- Problem-solve collaboratively with students about positive actions they can take to contribute deconstruct racism and bigotry. Consider actions that a school community may support.
- Provide comfort in uncertainty
- Turn to others for help. Adults are not immune from the big emotions that come from addressing racism with openness, and compassion. Role model asking for help and turn to your own support system (partner, friends, family) for care.

### **Ideas for Normalization and Validation of Racism Experiences**

Authentically recognizing strength in the face of adversity and in times of deep pain can be another powerful approach to activating an individual's sense of control, personal power, and value. It further reinforces positive connections and reminds the individual that not only are they seen; they are valued. Unequivocally. Here are some additional ideas around validation.

- Validate feelings and emotional responses to experiences of racism. The best connections are those in your own words that live naturally within the trusting relationship you have established. Begin with what they've shared with you through their affect, even if they were unable to put it into words themselves. It can start with something as simple as, *"I know that it hurts [enrages; saddens; bothers; concerns...] you; your experience is real and it matters."* You can then set the stage that you are ready and willing to listen, even if you don't have immediate answers. This may sound like an expression of authentic empathy, *"I appreciate you sharing how that felt for you. It hurts. I find it difficult to even hear about it, let alone experience it."*
- Allow them to name the situation (help them define issues if they don't know the names). *Discrimination hurts. Sexism hurts. Racism hurts. It's real. But we have ways to shield ourselves a bit from that pain, to build strengths from pain, to grow from pain. Sometimes, people lift themselves up by putting others around them down. What matters most is that you are undiminished and no less despite this experience. This is the moment to reaffirm who you are and to recall all the strengths that come from your culture.*
- This is a place to talk about how group identity common to communities of color can provide a powerful protective sense of belonging and connectedness. Support students in thinking about and engaging with their own personal power as well as the power in their community.

*"We belong to each other. Together, regardless of race and beyond race, we must want what is right for each other, aspire for better, and work for greater if we are to leave the generations of youth that will come after us a just and equitable society" ~Reaching Teens, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition p. 307*