

Guidelines for Being Strong White Allies

By Paul Kivel Adapted from *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Social Justice*.

What kind of active support does a strong white ally provide to a person of color? Over the years, people of color that I have talked with have been remarkably consistent in describing the kinds of support they need from white allies.

What People of Color Want from White Allies

"Respect us"	"Teach your children about racism"	"Money"
"Find out about us"	"Speak up"	"Make mistakes"
"Don't take over"	"Your body on the line"	"Honesty"
"Provide information"	"Listen to us"	"Talk to other white people"
"Resources"	"Don't make assumptions"	"Interrupt jokes and comments"
"Take risks"	"Stand by my side"	"Don't ask me to speak for my people"
"Don't take it personally"	"Don't assume you know what's best for me"	"Persevere daily"
"Understanding"		

Basic Tactics: Every situation is different and calls for critical thinking about how to make a difference. Taking the statements above into account, I have compiled some general guidelines.

1. **Assume racism is everywhere, every day.** Just as economics influences everything we do, just as gender and gender politics influence everything we do, assume that racism is affecting your daily life. We assume this because it's true, and because a privilege of being white is the freedom to not deal with racism all the time. We have to learn to see the effect that racism has. Notice who speaks, what is said, how things are done and described. Notice who isn't present when racist talk occurs. Notice code words for race, and the implications of the policies, patterns, and comments that are being expressed. You already notice the skin color of everyone you meet—now notice what difference it makes.
2. **Notice who is the center of attention and who is the center of power.** Racism works by directing violence and blame toward people of color and consolidating power and privilege for white people.
3. **Notice how racism is denied, minimized, and justified.**
4. **Understand and learn from the history of whiteness and racism.** Notice how racism has changed over time and how it has subverted or resisted challenges. Study the tactics that have worked effectively against it.
5. **Understand the connections between racism, economic issues, sexism, and other forms of injustice.**
6. **Take a stand against injustice.** Take risks. It is scary, difficult, and may bring up feelings of inadequacy, lack of self-confidence, indecision, or fear of making mistakes, but ultimately it is the only healthy and moral human thing to do. Intervene in situations where racism is being passed on.
7. **Be strategic.** Decide what is important to challenge and what's not. Think about strategy in particular situations. Attack the source of power.
8. **Don't confuse a battle with the war.** Behind particular incidents and interactions are larger patterns. Racism is flexible and adaptable. There will be gains and losses in the struggle for justice and equality.
9. **Don't call names or be personally abusive.** Since power is often defined as power over others—the ability to abuse or control people—it is easy to become abusive ourselves. However, we usually end up abusing people who have less power than we do because it is less dangerous. Attacking people doesn't address the systemic nature of racism and inequality.
10. **Support the leadership of people of color.** Do this consistently, but not uncritically.
11. **Learn something about the history of white people who have worked for racial justice.** There is a long history of white people who have fought for racial justice. Their stories can inspire and sustain you.
12. **Don't do it alone.** You will not end racism by yourself. We can do it if we work together. Build support, establish networks, and work with already established groups.
13. **Talk with your children and other young people about racism.**

What advice do you have for white radicals trying to figure out how to be anti-racist allies to folks of color?

That's an ongoing question that is open to debate. I think there are lots of different ways to be an anti-racist ally and that through practice we reflect, evaluate, keep learning, make mistakes, be gentle while also critical of ourselves and keep our eyes on the prize of liberation and struggle with guilt, shame and fear that are part of the process. Three ways that I think about being an ally are personally, working with individuals and then organizationally. These are all things that other people have told me, almost all women and people of color.

Personally, I grew up in a segregated area in Southern California. It wasn't until a Black studies class in community college that I was ever in a situation where white people weren't the clear numerical majority. I had some friends of color and I would say that while folks of color should not be expected to school white people about white supremacy/racism, be ready to say thank you if and when they do. It was very important for me to learn about struggles led by communities of color. This was through events put on by orgs of color, doing ethnic studies classes and women studies classes, working in groups led by folks of color. However, the main way that I see being an ally to folks of color is working with white people to challenge white supremacy and work for racial justice. This is the strategy that I pursue and I'm glad that other white folks are pursuing other strategies and that we can learn from each other.

Working with individuals. I think it's really important that white people support each other in doing anti-racist work. Having other white folks who are doing this work to talk with and struggle with each other, learn together, support one another and hold each other accountable is really useful and highly advisable. Working in groups is much more useful in challenging institutional injustices as well as overcoming personal insecurities that hold us back from the work. Relationships with folks of color and multiracial organizing is absolutely critical, but again, the responsibility needs to be with white folks to work with each other and not expect it from folks of color, even though folks of color end up doing most of this work.

Organizationally doing solidarity work if you're an all white group or mostly white is really important. Finding out what orgs of color are doing in your area, checking out events, asking people in groups that you decide you'd like to work with, "we're such and such group, is there anything useful that we could do to support your work". Be ready to take no for an answer and also be real about what you can and can't commit to doing. Do what you say you're going to do. Developing relationships with other orgs can take along time, but that's really what movement building is about.

In figuring out how to be allies I'd suggest that white folks read *A Promise and a Way of Life: White Antiracist Activism* by Becky Thompson, chapter 7 of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* and the writings of Helen Luu, Pauline Hwang, Laura Close, Chris Dixon and Laura McNeill on the Colours of Resistance website (<http://www.tao.ca/~colours>).