

LET'S GET REAL

WHAT PEOPLE OF COLOR CAN'T SAY
& WHITES WON'T ASK ABOUT RACISM

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THE ART OF MINDFUL INQUIRY

The following reflections and questions are helpful when there is a conflict or when someone shares with you a traumatic story. These reflections are most difficult to put into practice when someone is yelling or angry with you, especially when you disagree with someone who holds political, religious, gender, class, racial, or personal viewpoints that you're opposed to. And yet, it is precisely at those moments that perhaps these reflections and questions can help keep the conversation open and flowing, instead of defensive and adversarial, because they come from a perspective of curiosity. As Buddhist philosophy tells us, "Curiosity is the gateway to empathy."

1. What I heard you say....
2. Tell me more what you meant by....
3. What angered you about what happened?
4. What hurt you about what happened?
5. What's familiar about what happened?
How did it affect you? How does it affect you today?
6. What do you need / want?

1. What I heard you say...

One of the quickest ways to connect with someone is to use their own words. This is especially important when there is a conflict or a traumatic story has just been shared. (Also, reflecting back is a good intervention when you don't have any idea what to ask or do). When reflecting back, try to be succinct. Listing too many things about what they said will only overwhelm them. Begin by using their name and then, "What I heard you say was..." Choose a key phrase that they shared that best represents what is important to them, not to you. If they truly connect with you because they feel heard by you, they will add to their story and drop to a new level—trust.

Keep good eye contact and pause after using their name. In that way, you can "sense" whether or not a connection has been made by looking at their reaction to you. Also, be aware that, for some, eye contact is a cultural taboo. When that is the case, you can ask if that is an issue. For example, "I noticed you

looked away when I started talking. I was wondering what that might be about or if it is a cultural issue for you.”

2. Tell me more what you meant by...

This one statement is always a conversation-maker. It signals to the speaker that you are interested and also open to hearing more. When using this technique, remember to finish the sentence with something you heard them say. For example, “Tell me more what you meant by ‘not feeling safe.’”

3. What angered you about what happened?

Often anger is one of the emotions that is most feared in conflicts, conversations and relationships. However, avoiding or trivializing its importance often creates an escalation of the problem. Someone once said that to tame a wild bull is to give it a wider field. That is contrary to conventional thinking, which is to contain anger or send someone down the hall to a counselor or a human resource specialist. Thus, we seldom get to witness anger being dealt with or mediated out in the open, which might explain why we lack the skill sets needed to work through our disagreements and anger. For anger to be successfully transformative, it requires not only freedom of expression, but belief and understanding on the part of the listeners. That is why when someone expresses their feelings of anger, it is good for folks to repeat what they’ve heard and to share what they understood about what the anguish was all about.

4. What hurt you about what happened?

Many times, underneath one’s anger is a hurt that has not been acknowledged or validated. Validate the hurt and you are halfway there. Also, along with validation must come the willingness to see our part in the conflict or misunderstanding and to take responsibility for our actions and inactions.

Expressing one’s hurt is very emotionally vulnerable. It can only be helpful if there is trust and safety created by authentic sharing and compassionate listening. Take your time by first allowing the story and anguish to fully express itself. Be patient and look for an opening so you can ask what hurt about what happened. Allow for the relationship to develop and grow.

5. What’s familiar about what happened? How did it affect you? How does that affect you today?

This is the past tense question and one of the most significant reasons why most conflicts become heated. When someone is being triggered by a past experience or what another person said/did, we mistakenly take it personally and the conflict escalates. That is why this question is so important—it unveils the source of the anguish.

One of the tricks of moving from working with an individual to a larger group is asking, “Does this situation sound familiar to you in your own life?” In this way, the individual doesn’t feel like they are the only one who has this problem, and you, as the facilitator, get to find a way to involve the entire group so it doesn’t become an individual therapy session.

6. What do you need or want?

We often go quickly to this question so we can skip all of the above questions. Unfortunately, if we do, it is only a temporary stay from the real issues that need to be discussed and will only return later—unresolved and maybe even more heated. When I use this question, I often follow it up with, “Do you believe that this other person will follow through with their agreements? If not, what would it take for you to believe him/her?”

9 HEALTHY WAYS TO COMMUNICATE

1. Reflect back what is being said. Use their words, not yours.

When in doubt, the fastest way to de-escalate a conflict is to reflect back what is said. Though it may sound simplistic, it is often the most over-looked need in most conflicts—to be validated and acknowledged. It is also imperative to use their words, not yours. That is because there may be class and cultural differences when words are substituted. You have thirty seconds to make a connection. How they feel, what they need and what they don't need is right in front of you. The work is to be present and to listen carefully and with an open ear. Be a dedicated tape recorder and reporter. Reflect back only what is heard and seen.

2. Begin where they are, not where you want them to be.

Anaïs Nin once said that we don't see the world as it is, but rather as we are. That is why it is so critical to learn where another person is coming from, so that we can begin from where they are, not where we are, which often comes from our own needs and ways of doing things. In other words, love thy neighbor as they would like to be loved.

3. Be curious and open to what they are trying to say.

So often we make statements rather than asking a question. The Buddhists say that we do not learn from experience, but rather by our willingness to experience. Thus, curiosity is the gateway to empathy and understanding.

4. Notice what they are saying and what they are not.

From the Western perspective, we have been trained to listen carefully to what someone is saying or doing. However, from an Eastern perspective, it is equally useful to notice what they are not saying and what they are not doing. In other words, looking at the subtext. So that, as one is talking about their experiences with their father, notice that they haven't mentioned their mother. Or if they talk a great deal about their high school years, notice that they haven't mentioned anything about their lives in the present tense.

5. Emotionally relate to how they are feeling. Nurture the relationship.

Many times, it takes a lot of courage to emotionally share one's story in front of our peers or strangers. That is why it is equally important to reciprocate with some kind of reaction that shows that we are empathetic to what they have gone through and/or are experiencing even today. It is what I call "nurturing the relationship." A way of earning their trust by truly being present, authentic and emotionally supportive. In many cultures, this is often a "rite of passage" between two strangers. In group process this is about "emotionally aligning" ourselves with the client.

6. Notice how you are feeling. Be honest and authentic.

For someone to truly trust us, we must be willing to be honest about how we are feeling. If we are afraid, not sure, or don't know what to do, it is important not to pretend and to be truthful. Honesty and sincerity are what make others feel safe in a scary or uncertain situation. Not saying something or pretending everything is all right only makes it more unsafe.

7. Take responsibility for your part in the conflict or misunderstanding.

We all have been acculturated to be defensive, adversarial, and blaming of others when criticized or questioned. We have few, if any, models from any of our institutions about taking responsibility for their actions and behaviors. When was the last time you remember any politician, CEO, or president taking responsibility for doing something wrong before they got caught? How many companies have you known that have paid millions in lawsuits and admitted no wrongdoing? President Obama was told at a town hall meeting that he really erred in his first two cabinet choices, and he responded by saying that, yes, he had screwed up.

During his campaign he said that that because he had very little knowledge in those areas, he would appoint experts to help him and the person who disagreed with him would be the person he wanted to hear more from. No wonder he has more mail from folks offering ideas than any other president in the history of this country, because people feel they will be heard and that he is open to new ideas and solutions.

8. Try to understand how their past affects who they are and how those experiences affect their relationship with you.

Learning about one's past is essential in understanding why they react or don't react to you in a certain way. The key to learning about another person's journey comes from truly listening and being curious and not taking their reactions personally.

9. Stay with the process and the relationship, not just the solution.

Too often we rush to solve something rather than just listening and being supportive. I think that we rush to solve something because we need to be in control and to have all the answers. Staying in relationship with someone also means letting go of control and allowing a wide range of emotions to be expressed.