

Hiding in Plain Sight: Why Ignoring Race Helps Racism Flourish

In 2012, researchers at the University of Cambridge [tested 3- and 4-year-olds](#) to find out why children almost universally think covering their eyes makes them invisible. Their findings? It's all about being seen.

"It seems that children...assume that for somebody to be perceived, experience must be shared and mutually known to be shared, as it is when two pairs of eyes meet," one researcher said. If kids avoid eye contact, they believe they can't be seen – whether playing a game or avoiding a scolding.

"The look-away is the perfect getaway," as [one reporter](#) noted.

When it comes to dealing with racism, grown folks often act like these kids. Well-meaning anti-racists will proudly proclaim "I don't see color." Yikes! As our founder and Executive Director often states: "If you don't see color, you don't see me."

The focus of ARTI's work is to dismantle racism – a project best done with eyes wide open, because racism will not disappear if we simply pretend it's not there. Ignorance is not innocence. The racialized violence erupting in America today is a consequence of failing to see and acknowledge the racism at its root – racism that diminishes us all.

Dismantling the daily stream of [micro-aggressions](#), hate crimes and the physical and mental toll taken by systems designed to tilt power to mostly-White elites is mighty work – work that takes courage and collaboration in order to be successful.

So, what is a better approach than simply closing one's eyes and saying "I don't see color"? We have a few observations. Here's what our anti-racist allies would say:

- Develop an understanding of racism through the knowledge of its history
- Don't be afraid to use the words "racism" and "racist"
- Understand that there is a collective trauma based in racism and racist acts
- Don't be afraid of deep self-examination
 - Recognize implicit biases, attitudes and internalized stereotypes
 - Be aware of the societal advantages of "privilege" which include:
 - Lighter skin tone
 - Less scrutiny and stereotyping based on clothing and hairstyle choices
 - Less likely to be viewed by individuals and law enforcement as being a criminal or having criminal intent
 - More likely to have their history and contributions highlighted in school curricula while the history and contributions people of color is rarely acknowledged and when it is, it is marginalized
 - Greater social mobility
- Don't judge other cultures by the standards of your own culture
- Identify racial inequities within the areas where you can make a difference

Do We Have the Power?

Racism is so standard in our culture that most of us move through our lives oblivious to how racist policies, institutions and systems favor some and place others at a disadvantage. We ignore the ways institutions shape cultural beliefs and values that keep White people and people of color from collaborating to dismantle injustice.

Systemic racial discrimination protects the political, cultural, and economic interests of a few because it seems normal, unremarkable, and “the way things are.”

It doesn't have to be like this.

In Undoing Racism[®] workshops participants are shocked to learn that we all are “gatekeepers” – a term often negatively associated with the misuse of power and privilege. But within our own spheres of influence we all indeed are gate-keepers who can choose to withhold or share power, whether it be in our families, among friends, in our workplaces, or in elected office.

We all belong to networks of people (“nets that work”) that we can widen to identify and change policies, behaviors and beliefs that perpetuate racism.

We can refuse to “look away and get away.” We can choose to see.

#