**So, Somebody Called You Racist: Tips from a Formerly Ignorant White Girl**

[By Abby Norman](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/author/abby-norman2)

Okay. I get it. You are TOTALLY FREAKING OUT! Somebody called you racist. RACIST. You are SO NOT racist. How could they even think that about you? How could they SAY that about you! In front of other people! Who now may or may not think you are racist! This is like, the worst thing that has happened to you since you fell asleep in the tanning bed three days before prom! You probably turned that red. In front of everyone. When that person called you racist, which FYI you are just so. not. that.

I get it. I do. I know because I got called racist. Like. A lot. I moved from a very very white part of the country to Atlanta Georgia, home of MLK himself. And, well, I didn’t know how much I didn’t know. I got called racist sometimes and I wish I would have figured out what to do about that or had someone to help me. Let me take your hand and stroke your hair. You got called racist and it was awful, what should you do?

Here are some things you DO NOT do:

* You do not go to Human Resources/ Facebook/Twitter/ your mother to lodge a complaint that you have just been a victim of reverse racism. Reverse racism isn’t real and being told something you said or did was racist does not qualify as oppression.
* You do not go to Facebook/Twitter/a friend who happens to be a person of color (please tell me you have a friend who is a person of color...) to gain validation that you are not racist.
* You do not hold a grudge against this person for the rest of your life and also get all your friends to hate them because OMG you are NOT racist and the only reason ANYONE would EVER say that to you is because they, like, totally hate you or are jealous of you, or whatever so you do not have to take what they say seriously. Ever again. Because you are so not racist. You don’t even use the N-word when you are jamming along to Kanye, and BTW you were into him WAY before he got with a Kardashian.

Those, amongst other things, are things you should not do. So what do you do?

Well, you seem bothered by the fact that you are being called racist so I am going to go ahead and assume I don’t have to tell you to remove the confederate flag from your car, your shirt, your water bottle, your window. I am pretty sure you already know that is a no-no.

After you have done a stars and bars double check proceed to the first step.

**Step one:** Think about what was actually said.

Did someone call you a racist, or did someone point out the fact that something you said was racist. Those two things are not the same thing. I know that it felt like someone pointed at you and yelled I SAW YOU RIDING THROUGH MY NEIGHBORHOOD WITH YOUR FRIENDS IN YOUR WHITE HOODS! I KNOW YOU BURN CROSSES IN PEOPLE’S YARDS. But maybe that isn’t what actually happened. I mean, probably not. Probably no one just casually said “you are a racist.” Probably someone who cares about you didn’t just say, “dude, you are a racist.” Probably someone said that something you said or did was racist.

I know you feel called out, especially if this happened in front of other people, but here is the good news. No one is trying to correct that one totally bigoted cranky old uncle at the Thanksgiving table. If someone pointed out to you that something you said was racist, that means, probably, they think you don’t want to be racist. They think you would want to learn and be better. No one is trying to educate willfully ignorant Aunt Dottie who asked your sister’s husband to “fetch her bags” from the car last Christmas and then tried to tip him and send him on his way because he wasn’t white even though she attended their wedding three years ago.

**Step Two:** Think about racism as systemic rather than relational.

Okay, when you hear “racist” you hear “YOU HATE BLACK PEOPLE!” And you don’t hate black people. You dated a black guy! Your sister’s babies are mixed! You volunteered in New Orleans on spring break for three years! You love it when the African Boys choir comes to your church! You are totally part of the Bey hive! Duh.

But what you are hearing and what was said are not the same thing. Probably, when someone told you that something you said or did was racist, what they meant was that you were somehow perpetuating a system through thought or deed that continues to privilege white people. That seems a little more likely huh?

Frankly, us white people need to get over ourselves. It just isn’t going to matter that much if we as individuals love or hate people who are not white, it just isn’t. But the system that we currently live in that benefits us while making it more difficult for people of color, now that is something that we should all be interested in dismantling, even if that means getting called out (and it probably will).

Did something you say or do feed into a stereotype about another race? Did you mistake one person for another simply because they were the same race? Or you thought they were related or somehow knew each other? Did you assume the Brazilian lady at your work was Mexican and asked her if she could make you some Tamales? Did you think people from South Korea and Vietnam shared the same culture as your Chinese friends? Did you not take the time to pronounce a non-white name correctly? Did you think something was hilarious simply because it was not familiar to you? Did you describe something as “ghetto?” (Seriously. Stop doing that.)

**Step Three:** Educate yourself

Now that you have identified the issue, think about why that might be a problem. I know you are tempted to just go ask the person who called you out how to fix it, and depending on your relationship with that person that might be appropriate. BUT, maybe you could do your own research? In our culture it is totally normal for white people to unconsciously think of people of color as there to help them. If you don’t know the person that well, maybe take the time to research on your own. Google works for white people to, and can do more than just teach you new ways to prepare quinoa. In an age when so much information is available for free, we really have no excuse for being ignorant about racial oppression. Really we don’t know because it didn’t occur to us to want to. Google systemic racism, institutional racism, white people and racism. The book that opened my eyes is called “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria: And Other Conversations About Race.” It is probably in your library. It is for sure on Amazon. Go get it. Then read it. Then think about it.

**Step Four:** Keep it Moving

So hopefully by now you get it. Maybe, at least a little bit more than you do before. And probably, you feel bad. Here is the thing, I need you to not center your feelings. Your feelings are not the most important thing in this equation. Feeling like you did something wrong is the first step in doing something right, not the last.

Feeling bad about systemic racism without changing anything is like feeling bad about running someone over with your car but not bothering to move it off their chest. It just isn’t helpful. While we are on the subject, needing a cookie isn’t helpful either. I know, you learned something new and it was hard work and made you uncomfortable but you powered through and learned it anyway.

But now you notice ALL THESE OTHER WHITE PEOPLE who like, totally don’t get it like you do. You just want people, especially your friends of color, to know that you are so not like them. Also, you have been working hard and you just want someone to notice! We cannot be expected to be rewarded for doing the work voluntarily, that people of color have to do just to survive with their dignity in tact. If you want a cookie for what you did, then go get one for yourself and eat it without telling anyone.

Now that you know better, you can do better. So go, do better. And listen up. I know that you are REALLY proud of knowing better, but the fact is that there will always be a lot for you to learn. I tell you this as someone who still has a lot to learn.

I say formally ignorant white girl, but it should probably say a little less ignorant white girl. Just a little bit less. The system is designed to give me a boost, so I am simply less likely to notice it. It always stings a little when I get called out for saying something racist (It happened last week, by a 16-year-old and I wanted her to be wrong, but she wasn’t.) Walking humbly has helped me learn a lot faster than I used to.

Because you want to know what is worse than being called racist? Actually being racist.