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“What do I do?” A framework for white people responding to racial violence



Dimitri Antoniou May 31, 2020 · 6 min read

I and many others not directly affected by racial violence confront news of police brutality and are left asking: what do I do? I think we all have to answer that question individually, but I believe in three guiding principles:

- 1) *Do something* — don't let searching for the exact right action prevent you from taking action at all
- 2) Act to leverage your opportunities and respect your constraints
- 3) Let the victims of violence guide your actions and response

#1 Do something

Trying to decide on the right, best, most impactful, most equitable, etc. course of action can induce anxiety. It can also scare you to consider taking actions that may alienate your friends and family. The combination of that anxiety and fear can easily lead you to stay your hand. But my first belief in what white people should do in the face of racial violence is simply: *do something*.

Here are types of actions you can take:

- *Learn*: educating yourself on the history and state of race in America is the most immediate way to combat bias in yourself and the people around you
- *Give*: donate to organizations like Black Lives Matter and the ACLU; support bail funds for protesters; give to support funds for victims of violence
- *Show up*: show up at protests and demonstrations, and while there use the safety of your skin color to defend people of color protesting
- *Share*: re-post the first-hand experiences of people of color; send news articles to friends and family; share stories, data, arguments, and opportunities! (Note: be sensitive to what you share. I suggest not sharing photo/video content that shows violence — imagine how it would feel to be targeted by police, and to constantly watch people like you be targeted police every time you went online.)
- *Write*: you have a unique perspective, you have a platform, you have a network. If you hold a belief, write it down and share it. The more voices speaking, arguments constructed, and beliefs proclaimed, the stronger a collective voice becomes.
- *Call*: call state representatives, congressmen, businesses, organizations, even individuals! Any one of us can add our voice to the call list and thereby put pressure on the political and economic drivers of change.

#2 Act to leverage your opportunities and respect your constraints

Each of us constrained by different factors like health, money, and work. Similarly, each of us has access to a unique set of opportunities according to our job, education, family, etc. Given this complexity, there's no single course of action that will work for everyone. Consider your options, recognize your limitations, and start along your path.

One of my most gut-wrenching decisions is to attend protests or not. I've been before, showing up to support Black Lives Matter, to remove confederate statues, and to support immigrant rights. But currently, with the variability and volatility of protests in the wake of George Floyd's murder, I don't feel that protesting is the right choice for me.

I have suffered from a half dozen severe concussions throughout my life, making me vulnerable to any sort of physical trauma or injury. I have family and friends who are immunocompromised, making them at-risk from COVID-19. At my work, nearly 20

employees and 100 students rely on me for their livelihood and education. Because of these constraints, there's a high risk and cost to physical protesting.

At the same time, I am privileged to hold a degree in Urban Studies from the University of Pennsylvania, having studied and researched race, politics, power, and history. I feel well-versed in ideology and philosophy, arguments for and against, and the variety of debates surrounding protest and racial violence. I also have a wide network of thousands of Facebook friends and LinkedIn connections. Moreover, I've been trained and worked as a critical writing tutor, and feel comfortable putting my thoughts on paper. With all those in mind, I choose to leverage my education, voice, and network to support victims of racial violence, confront bigotry, and educate ignorance.

Lastly, I am privileged to have been put on a strong path of education and employment by my parents. I enjoy economic stability, even during these times of crisis. So while I may not be at a protest, I can support those protesters by donating funds to bail funds and activist organizations.

This math will look different for each of us. I encourage you to think about your risks and opportunities, while also gauging the ROI of your actions.

#3 Let the victims of violence guide your action

No matter how hard I try, I will never understand the experience of black and other people of color in America. Despite reading, listening, and watching, I will never quite understand. So, I choose to let the beliefs and actions of people who are directly affected guide me.

Some key lessons I've learned from generous friends of mine include:

- Listen more, speak less. When talking with people of color, listen and try to understand. You don't need to have an opinion, example, or objection to everything.
- Don't stay silent. As one friend said on Facebook: “Your allyship right now may cost you relationships. But your silence may cost our lives.”
- Educate yourself. Before asking questions of people of color about their experiences, research those questions, think about them on your own, and engage in

conversation with your white friends. Do the legwork to understand, so that less burden falls on the very people you aim to support.

- Don't share graphic content of violence. People of color confront those injustices every day in person, and they can never set aside that burden. It is hurtful and traumatizing to constantly relive those experiences every time they go online, and it will affect them differently because you don't see yourself in that imagery.
- Confront your friends and family. It's hard to confront bigotry at large, but it's even harder to confront it at home. When your friends and family make comments or take actions that you disagree with, find a way to engage with them. If you can help even a few people adjust their perspective, you can make a rippling impact.
- Value justice over comfort. For too long, we've idolized peaceful protest, oversimplified MLK and the Civil Rights Movement, and grown comfortable with the status quo. Nothing new is happening — we're just seeing more of it. So while it may be scary to see protests, property destruction, and looting, ask yourself: is this really worse than what's already happening? How does a broken window compare to hundreds of lives being brutally taken by our own government? When you consider condemning or challenging violence, destruction, or chaos consider what value you are prioritizing: justice or comfort?
- Check in on your black friends, but be intentional about how you're doing it. They're likely not doing well, so asking “how are you” can be kind of a downer. Instead, personalize your message to show you are thinking about them and care about their individual experience. Try something like: “I want to reach out in the wake of this week's murder and protests. If you feel like talking, what are some of the feelings you've experienced this week? Thinking of you.”

While the above are some key lessons I've pulled out, you're best off taking your guidance directly from people of color. Follow The Root and Blavity, for example, for content like:

- The Root: [12 ways to be a white ally to black people](#)
- Blavity: [How to be a white ally](#)
- Sojourners: [For our white friends desiring to be allies](#)

I’m 26, white, college-educated, and employed. I, like everyone else, am constantly trying to understand my place in the world. Which means I am constantly learning and making mistakes. If you have feedback for how I can do better, I’d love to hear it. If you want to learn and make mistakes alongside me, I’d value your collaboration.

Most importantly, *do something. Get in the arena.*

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.” — Theodore Roosevelt

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