

What about Friends and Family Members?

From Uprooting Racism by Paul Kivel

We may have a lot more at stake personally when confronted with friends or family members who are outspokenly racist. Our ability to continue the relationship or to spend time with that person may be at issue. Unfortunately, there is no magic dust that will help them change their minds. In such situations, I have had to decide whether to challenge their opinions, set limits to what they can say around me, end the relationship or agree to disagree. Obviously your decision depends partly on how close and/or important the relationship is to you. Even in those rare times when I have decided to end a relationship, I have tried to make it clear that it is because of my values and because of my commitment to my friends and colleagues of color that I could not continue to spend time with that person's attitude, comments and behavior. I want them to know that it is specifically because of their racism that I can't be around them, not because of personality differences or different interests.

However, in most relationships there are grounds for engagement. All of us who are white have work to do on racism, all of us who are men on sexism, all of us who are straight on heterosexism. Rather than feeling superior or righteous because "I'm not racist," we can gently but seriously challenge each other. I try to engage people in open discussion with questions like:

- Why did you say that?

- Why do you say such stereotyped and negative things about people of color?
- I've known you a long time, and I know you're not as mean-spirited as that comment makes you sound.
- I love you a lot, but I can't let these things that you do around people of color go unchallenged.
- You may know a great deal about ... But when it comes to talking about this issue you're wrong, misinformed, inaccurate, not looking at the whole picture.
- I've been told by Asian Americans that the word you used is very offensive. Did you know that? Are you trying to hurt people?

I find that I can quickly tell if someone is well-intentioned but unaware of the effects of their words, or if they are resistant and not likely to change their behavior.

When relating to friends and family I speak up because I can no longer remain silent. I refuse to bond or collude with other white people in maintaining racism. I hope my actions make it easier for people of color to be around these particular white people. But I am also clear that my efforts at this level, as necessary as they are for me, are not going to end racism. This realization keeps me from spending all my time in discussions with Uncle Max and Aunt Jane about how they talk about people of color.

I think it is crucial that as white people we work with other white people. But not every white person, not all of the time, perhaps not even most of the time.

