**How NOT to be a Jerk 101**

**--Kristance Harlow wearyourvoicemag.com**

Hey, white folks, stop getting offended when someone calls you racist. Instead, try this: shut up, listen and learn. Welcome to the crash course that is here to teach you how to be less of a jerk when you’re called racist.

Impact is different than intent. When someone is calling you out on a prejudicial and problematic comment, it’s because your impact is harmful — no matter what you intended. When it comes to racism, sexism, ableism or any other kind of problematic discourse or behavior, it is time to stop reacting defensively when accused of an “ism.”

**Lesson 1: Racism**

***How White Folks Respond to Accusations of Racism***

White people get really touchy when called out for racism, even when another white person does the calling out. Some of us get angry and oh-so-offended.

Some white people will respond by providing a list of their qualifications that “proves” their lack of racism. Common phrases include: “*I have lots of [insert non-white ethnicity here] friends.” “I love Beyoncé.” “I am aware of those issues and I am not racist.” “I donated time and money to #BlackLivesMatter.” “I voted for Obama.” “I can’t believe you would call me racist.” “This issue isn’t about race.” “There someone goes playing the race card.” “I didn’t mean it like that.”*

Other white people will try to flip the script and accuse people of color of racism against whites. Some white people will cry publicly and turn the attention to their own feelings, diverting attention from where it should be.

***What White Folks Think Racism Is***

White people are taught that racism is obvious. While there are many knots to untangle in this rat’s nest of oppression, one pervasive thread is how stereotypes play into our understanding of *what a racist looks like*. It’s dressed up in the bleached garb of KKK members. It’s tattooed with a Nazi swastika. It’s an angry middle-aged white man hurling slurs at a stranger. It’s a great grandmother at Thanksgiving who warns you against dating a Mexican. To be called racist is framed as this horrible vile thing that you have to defend yourself against.

We are fed a narrative that legal equality has all but eradicated racism. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” There is no quote as misappropriated by whites as this one. White culture believes that racism is hatred of another person for the color of their skin. Thus, many believe being “colorblind” is the best way to avoid racism.

***What Racism Really Is***

All of these misconceptions are the result of stereotypes. Stereotypes of what racism is, what oppression is and even what groups of people someone can be racist against. But anyone can be prejudiced or discriminate against anyone for any reason. A black person can be prejudiced against white people, but that is not racism. Racism is “prejudice plus power.” “Reverse racism” does not exist, because society was built through, and is maintained by, institutional inequality against people of color. Prejudice is one part of racism, but racism functions at every level of society and acts on countless fronts to reinforce systematic subjugation while protecting white people.

***A Better Response***

It can be very uncomfortable to be called out for racism, but it is nothing compared to the oppression perpetuated by that racist thought/behavior/word. I am a white lady and I know it can be painful and excruciatingly embarrassing to be called racist. I don’t want to be racist, but I am. **Racists are a product of a society built on oppression, but they are not victims.** Centering your own internal shame is not only selfish, it’s adding to the problem by diverting energy and attention away from the real issues at hand. Do not allow your white sensitivities to take up space.

Stop getting so angry when called racist. Instead, hold your tongue, listen and try to figure out why you’re being called out.

**Lesson 2: Multiple -Isms**

***The Scenario***

Charlie shares a news story on her private Facebook page about Roosh V promoting the idea of legal rape. Several people comment, including a white hetero cis male named Pat. Pat comments, “I just looked this douchebag up and \*surprise surprise\* he’s Iranian!”

Charlie responds, “You have derailed the conversation with an inaccurate and, quite frankly, racist comment.”

Pat snaps back, “I’m the least racist person you know. How many African Americans and Hispanics do you work with and have in your home every day? Look up Roosh V’s blog for your edification.”

Charlie responds, “I am so outrageously offended. Don’t talk down to me.”

Pat, no less angry than before, writes, “FYI , you’re offended? You called me a racist for fuck sake!!! Who do you think you are to judge me? The point is my family’s closest friends not ‘collected nonwhites’ happen to be African American. Typical. Read his blog then pop off.”

*What Happened?*

Pat is displaying multiple “isms” in this exchange. First, he is inserting himself into a discussion about a cis male who supports raping women. He deflects the conversation from that of rape culture by making a racist comment. A culture of which Pat is a part of, whether he wants to be or not. Pat is mansplaining. Pat is taking focus away from the actual problem.

***The Scenario Continued***

Charlie later discusses this exchange with a friend, Skylar. Charlie is white and Skylar is a person of color. Skylar is upset by the content of Pat’s comments and tells Charlie, “I can relate, the way he talked over you happens to me all the time with white people.”

***Choose the Best Reaction for Charlie***

1. Tell Skylar that the sexism part isn’t the same thing as racism.
2. Get upset and tell Skylar that was a mean thing to say because she’s white and not like that.
3. Remind Skylar that not everything is an excuse to pull the race card.
4. None of the above.

If you chose D, you are correct.

If Charlie reacted by silencing Skylar, she would be doing the same thing that Pat did. Charlie would be whitesplaining.

**Summary**

It’s not ideal to be constantly unintentionally problematic. However, it can be OK — if you learn from it and listen to the people who are willing to point it out.

I have had to admit my offensiveness, ignorance and privilege over and over again. What I may consider a misstep with good intentions could be very damaging. I need to know when that happens. We all do. If you didn’t mean to be racist, then you should ***want*** to learn about how your well-intentioned behavior is problematic so your actions can match your intentions.

I’m stubborn and sensitive. Admitting I was in the wrong is not a painless thing, but those pains are necessary growing pains. It is proof of a system that has protected white sensibilities for centuries. I like to think I glean a wee bit of knowledge each time I have a growing pain, and that I’m hopefully accumulating enough mistakes and corrections to allow me to be less harmful and more helpful.