

# How To Comfort a Friend: Racial Trauma

*Racial trauma: It's the holistic response People of Color experience due to persistent acts of discrimination, bias, and even hate. Racial trauma and its aftermath are a destructive force to families and generations around the world.*

*Like other kinds of trauma, it can cause powerful physical and emotional responses.*

*Receiving your friend's story with empathy and openness, rather than providing a one-stop shop for healing, can be one important step toward restoration.*

*Galatians reminds us, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (6:2). As you seek to comfort your friend, hold space for the sorrow injustice brings.*

*"The first service one owes to others in a community involves listening to them. Just as our love for God begins with listening to God's Word, the beginning of love for others is learning to listen to them. God's love for us is shown by the fact that God not only gives God's Word, but also lends us God's ear.*

*We do God's work for our brothers and sisters when we learn to listen to them.*

*...Christians who can no longer listen to one another will soon no longer be listening to God either."*

**DIETRICH BONHOEFFER—PASTOR, AUTHOR, MARTYR**



## What to Say: Start here



### **Establish trust, then extend the invitation.**

"If you feel comfortable, I'd like to understand what happened to you. Would you feel like telling me your story?"

**Pause before you respond,** praying to invite the Holy Spirit to love your friend through you. Don't feel the need to fill silence. (It's been suggested Job's friends did their best work when they were silent!) Create space for grief, anger, fear, and loss.

**Validate their experience.** "That sounds horrible. I *hate* that this happened to you." Express your gratitude that your friend trusted you with this story of vulnerability.



**More than to dissect the situation, ask questions to truly understand their experience in their shoes.**



- “What was that like for you?”
- “What did you feel in that moment?”
- “What do you wish you could have said?”
- “What was going through your mind?”
- “How did you think and feel about that afterward? (And what situations do you avoid after going through that, if any?)”
- “What do you wish they would have done differently?”
- “Would you feel comfortable telling me more?”

**Affirm your friend’s God-given worth.** “Your culture, heritage, and race were treated like they were a weakness or something to be looked down on. But to me, they give you so much strength. I know more about God’s character because I know you, as a person who bears His image.”

“I hope you know that who you are, in every part of you, is deeply valuable to me and this world. And what has happened is in no way okay.”

**Encourage them to take the space they need to grieve and heal.** “How have you been coping with this? How have you found ways to talk about this and deal in ways that help?”



**Ask how their experience has changed them. You could ask,**

- “What do you feel when you think about this now?”
- “What does it make you feel like doing?”
- “How has this changed you?”
- “How has this trauma affected your faith? How have you experienced God and related to Him in all of this?”

**If it becomes hard to listen to your friend,** realize this is a normal feeling when we don’t know what to say, aren’t used to conversations like this, or are afraid of saying the wrong thing. Assess your own emotions, and ask yourself why you might be reacting the way you are.

If it feels hard to believe something so different from your own experience, realize your reality may be very different from your friend’s. Consider how you could continue learning about experiences like theirs.

But know that silencing differences contributes to unjust situations continuing. We don't want to keep people with different thoughts and experiences on the outside of our relational circles.

Particularly as Christians, none of us can say, "I don't need you!" When one of us suffers, we all suffer ([1 Corinthians 12:21-26](#)).

*"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."*

LILLA WATSON



## What Not to Say

In "[How to Respond with Compassion when Someone is Hurt by Racism](#)," authors Trinh Mai and Jean Whitlock explain there are general responses that would "leave the wound uncared for." This echoes [Jeremiah 6:14](#): "They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace."

Mai and Whitlock offer ideas of what not to say:

- **Invalidation and minimization of impact.** *"This happens to everyone."*
- **Disbelief that it's racism; asking a lot of questions.** *"I'm sure they were stressed, and you just happened to be there." "How did you approach them?"*
- **Highlighting of innocent intentions.** *"I don't think that was their intention."*
- **Rush to problem-solving.** *"You can always contact Human Resources..." "What do you want me to do about it?"*
- **Defending the status quo.** *"Sometimes those attitudes are generational."*
- **Personal defensiveness; need for reassurance from the fear of being seen as racist.** *"I hope you know I would never..."*

**Be sensitive with your desire to apologize.** Therapist and author Shadeen Francis states in [“How to talk with your Black friends about race.”](#) “An apology without action is empty...So to apologize for [racism] that is not new ... and that you benefit from doesn’t actually serve the goal of being supportive. Then it also feels like the other person’s responsibility to somehow make that right by saying, ‘It’s fine.’”



Finally, **show up and speak up.** Silence furthers indifference. Continue conversations with those who’ve experienced this kind of injustice and loss, as well as with the Holy Spirit, about steps you could take to love them well as both a friend and advocate.

*For more thoughtful principles on how to receive your friend’s story of pain, see FamilyLife’s [Tips for Talking about Sensitive Issues](#). And don’t miss our FamilyLife Equip video, [What Does Social Justice Have to Do with Making Disciples?](#)*

*“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,  
for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge  
fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.”*

**PROVERBS 31:8-9**