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You Don’t Have to Agree With Racism to Help It Survive



Maia Niguel Hoskin, Ph.D. Follow 6 min read · 2 days ago

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You’re sitting at Thanksgiving dinner. Someone makes a racist joke. Or says something wildly inappropriate about immigrants. Or, with remarkable confidence, explains why women are too emotional to be effective leaders.

You hear it, know it’s wrong, and even exchange that little look with someone across the table. You know the look. *Did they really just say that?* But you don’t say anything.

Because it’s Thanksgiving. Because you don’t feel like arguing. Because that’s your uncle, and he’s been saying ridiculous things since 1987. Or because you don’t want to ruin dinner. So, you laugh awkwardly, change the subject, keep eating your macaroni and cheese, and everybody moves on. But what happens when *everybody* keeps moving on?

The Path of Least Resistance

Years ago, sociologist Allan G. Johnson wrote about a concept in his book *Privilege, Power, and Difference* that I think deserves renewed attention, especially in our current political climate. He called it the path of least resistance. Essentially, Johnson argued that social systems create patterns of behavior that feel easier and more natural to follow than to challenge.

We learn what is acceptable, what is expected, what will make other people comfortable, and what might happen if we refuse to play along. These patterns help maintain systems of privilege and oppression, sometimes without people even recognizing their participation. And that’s what makes the idea so unsettling.

You do not have to personally hate a group of people to participate in a system that disadvantages them. Sometimes you simply have to keep doing what everybody else is doing. Or, in this case, keep saying nothing. The racist

joke goes unchallenged; the sexist comment gets a nervous laugh, or the ableist remark gets brushed aside.

The homophobic observation becomes just another example of somebody being “old-fashioned,” and the person making the comment leaves the interaction having encountered absolutely no resistance. *How convenient*.

We Have Become Very Committed To Keeping The Peace

We are all exhausted. Politically, emotionally, socially, and financially. Some of us are barely making it through the workweek without sitting in our cars for seven minutes before going into the house. The last thing we want is to spend Sunday dinner debating immigration with Uncle Robert, who gets 90% of his information from Facebook.

Sometimes, genuinely, the healthiest choice is to disengage. Not every disagreement requires a debate. Not every offensive comment deserves your energy, and not every person is interested in learning.

But here’s where I think we need to be careful. When does protecting our peace become protecting other people’s prejudice from being challenged? Those are not necessarily the same thing.

Sometimes we avoid the conversation because it feels dangerous or unproductive. We’re avoiding it because we don’t want to be disliked. We don’t want to be labeled difficult. We don’t want to create tension at work, and we don’t want to upset anyone. In protecting ourselves from that discomfort, we may leave someone else to bear the consequences of what we said.

Silence Teaches People Something Too

This isn’t just a philosophical argument. Psychological research suggests that confronting prejudice can meaningfully influence behavior. A 2025 meta-analysis published in the *Psychological Bulletin* examined 91 effect sizes across studies investigating whether confronting bias reduces prejudice.

Researchers found an overall moderate reduction in biased responses after confrontation, particularly in stereotype use or endorsement. They also cautioned that much of the research occurred in controlled environments, so the long-term impact in everyday situations is less certain. Another study involving 1,308 participants found that challenging prejudiced comments helped restore social expectations against bias.

In some circumstances, witnessing someone challenge anti-Black prejudice also increased participants’ sense that the environment was safe for their identity. When you speak up, you aren’t necessarily just addressing the person who made the comment. You’re also communicating something to everyone who heard it. That racism isn’t simply normal conversation.

That sexism isn’t harmless humor. That making an entire group of people the punchline isn’t something everybody has silently agreed to tolerate. And that matters.

Discomfort Is Not Always A Bad Thing

I think we’ve developed an interesting relationship with discomfort. We want growth, progress, equality, and a more just society. But we would also prefer that none of those things require a difficult conversation with somebody we actually know.

We will repost a brilliant Instagram graphic about social justice in approximately four seconds. But telling our coworker that her comment about the new Black employee sounded stereotypical? Now we’re busy.

That is precisely where Johnson’s argument becomes important. Systems of inequality don’t survive solely because people enthusiastically support them. They can also persist because ordinary people keep participating in familiar patterns instead of disrupting them.

It’s much easier to oppose prejudice in the abstract than to challenge it in your own social circle. And sometimes the people who need challenging most aren’t strangers online. They’re the people sitting across from us.

Marginalized People Should Not Have to Do All The Confronting

I’m not suggesting that Black people should spend every office water cooler conversation correcting racism. Or that women should spend every family dinner educating sexist family members. Or that LGBTQ people should continually explain their humanity to people determined to question it.

That is exhausting, and depending on the situation, confrontation can carry professional, social, or even physical risks. People already experiencing discrimination should not be responsible for correcting everyone else’s prejudice. This is where allies become important.

If you’re a man and another man makes a sexist comment, perhaps you’re in a position to challenge it. If you’re white and someone makes a racist joke, perhaps you can interrupt it rather than waiting for the one Black person in the room to respond. If you have professional authority, perhaps you can question practices that disadvantage people with less institutional power.

And no, you don’t have to become the designated social justice police at every dinner party. But you can recognize when your silence carries consequences for somebody else.

With The Midterms Approaching, These Conversations Matter

We’re approaching another major election, and the country feels extraordinarily divided. People are arguing about immigration, gender, race, religion, and education. They’re debating who belongs, who deserves protection, and whose rights matter.

I understand why people want to avoid political conversations altogether. But there is a difference between disagreeing about public policy and normalizing dehumanizing language about entire groups of people. We should be able to debate government spending without demonizing people experiencing poverty.

Discuss immigration policy without assuming immigrants are inherently dangerous. Debate education without reducing LGBTQ children to political talking points. And disagree about public leadership without relying on racist or sexist stereotypes.

The language we tolerate in everyday life shapes what becomes acceptable in public life. If we won't challenge prejudice in our everyday conversations, why should we expect it to disappear from our larger institutions?

You Don’t Have to Turn Every Conversation Into A War

Challenging prejudice doesn’t always require a lengthy confrontation. Sometimes it’s as simple as asking for clarification about the person’s point so that they can actually hear what they are saying. Or asking someone why they think a classist or racist joke is funny. You can even say something as simple as, “That sounds like a stereotype to me.”

You don’t necessarily need a dissertation. You don’t need to raise your voice or embarrass somebody in front of an audience. Sometimes asking a thoughtful question creates enough interruption for someone to reconsider what they’ve said.

And sometimes the person will become defensive. They’ll accuse you of being too sensitive. They’ll say nobody can take a joke anymore. They’ll insist you misunderstood.

Fine. You’re not responsible for controlling their reaction. And you aren’t obligated to continue a conversation that becomes abusive or unsafe. But you can decide that your own comfort will not always take priority over your values.

The Path of Least Resistance Comes With A Cost

That’s where I keep landing. I don’t believe we need to challenge everything. We have finite emotional resources. We have families, jobs, and bills. We have our own mental health to protect.

Sometimes choosing not to engage is an entirely appropriate boundary. But if we repeatedly choose silence simply because speaking up might make us uncomfortable, we should examine what that silence preserves. Systems of inequality are not maintained only through dramatic acts of hatred.

They can also be reinforced through ordinary moments of avoidance. A comment nobody challenges. A stereotype nobody questions. A discriminatory practice everybody has learned to work around.

One person staying quiet may not change much. But millions of people staying quiet? That can preserve an entire culture. Perhaps that is Johnson’s most enduring lesson. Changing the system requires us to stop automatically following the paths that keep it running.

Not every battle is ours to fight. Not every hill is ours to die on. But eventually, we have to be willing to stand on something. Because the path of

least resistance may keep us comfortable. It just doesn’t necessarily take us anywhere better.

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Written by Maia Niguel Hoskin, Ph.D.

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Responses (3)

Tom Mitchell

What are your thoughts?

Jezebel13
20 hours ago

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Jacqueline Laughlin
1 day ago

Thank you .. when to speak up. When to stay silent. Get to decide on that most days if you’re lucky Excellent post. Provocative and loving. Nice combo

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veganelder
1 day ago

Thank you for writing this.

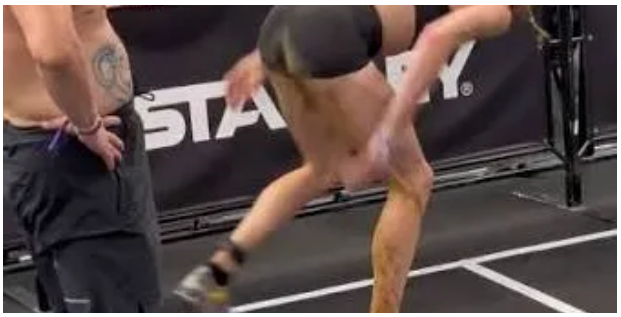
And thanks for referencing Allan Johnson, his efforts are too little noticed.

Reply

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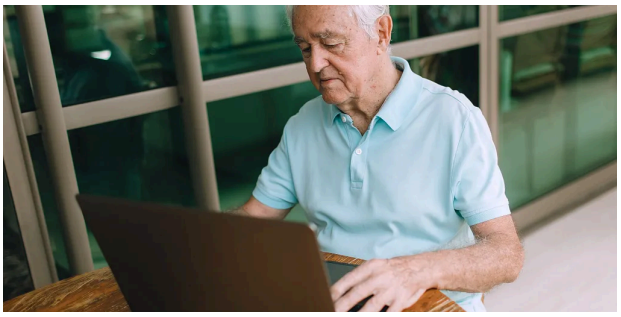


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