

Where We Start: Inspirations for White People Working against White Supremacy

Amanda Udis-Kessler, June 26, 2021; revised October 25, 2021

White supremacy plays out in profoundly complicated ways at personal, interpersonal, cultural, and institutional levels. This complexity can make the idea of working against white supremacy as a white person seem overwhelming and impossible. In fact, teasing apart the different places where white supremacy occurs and the ways it takes place offers those of us who are white innumerable opportunities to work against it – because white supremacy is everywhere that we are and so we are in many places where white supremacy is at work. This short document introduces some ways to think about how we can begin to work against white supremacy as white people. You will notice a great deal of overlap between sections; neither white supremacy nor the work against it can be neatly segmented into different categories.

I use the phrase “people from BIPOC communities” below to refer to Black people, Indigenous people, and all people of color in the US. I use the terms “white supremacy” and “racism” interchangeably in this essay, aware that “white supremacy” is usually the more useful term. I refer to European-descended people as “white” though there are different perspectives on the value and limitations of that term. I include people who are not (or not only) European-descended but who pass as white based on their appearance with the European-descended people addressed in the title of this essay, including them in the term “white” to streamline the writing.

This essay does not include a list of specific resources (books, organizations, websites, etc.). Part of our work as white people is to seek out those resources, learn where to find them, and make use of them.

Start with your broken heart

Why start here? Because if white supremacy and other forms of inequality break your heart, honoring that heartbreak and vowing to work for less suffering in the world can be a powerful experience that moves you to make a difference while increasing your compassion.

Concrete actions you can take: Pay attention to your emotional response when you learn about some new racist injustice or act of violence (or about the history of white supremacy and what that history has to do with the present). How do you feel? Why do you feel that way? If you had all the time, energy, and resources in the world, what action would you take to work against white supremacy that would lessen (or prevent) someone else’s suffering? Given that you have limited time, energy, and resources, identify one or more small things you can do to honor your heartbreak about white supremacy and lessen someone else’s pain. This may mean that your next step is one of self-education, or it may mean seeing that a protest is taking place and simply going to it. It may mean carrying out one of the many other activities suggested in this document or it may mean something entirely different.

Start with your discomfort

Why start here? Because let's face it, acknowledging the depth, power, and violence of white supremacy is profoundly uncomfortable for white people. Given the way the good/bad binary plays out in white supremacy (as described by Robin DiAngelo in her book *White Fragility*), to acknowledge that one benefits in any way from white supremacy would appear to make one a "bad" person and none of us want to see ourselves as bad people. Also, most of us will, at some point, say or do something racist and we will feel defensive or humiliated or both when people from BIPOC communities point this out to us. Finally, depending on our gender and class background and other identities, we may be more comfortable being the expert or being the person who makes decisions or who gets their way, and less comfortable putting someone else's experiences and agenda center-stage. For these reasons and many others, we are almost certainly going to have to deal with discomfort and a range of negative responses at some point in our work against white supremacy, and if we don't deal with them, they can immobilize or derail us. If we do deal with them and if we build resilience, we will be better equipped to work against white supremacy.

Concrete actions you can take: Confront your discomfort head-on. Sit with it. Meditate with it. Get comfortable with it. Seriously – it is a fantastic opportunity for spiritual and psychological growth. Consider reading Resmaa Menakem's book *My Grandmother's Hands* and doing the exercises in it; if Buddhism is meaningful to you, consider reading and working with Ruth King's book *Mindful of Race: Transforming Racism from the Inside Out*. Once your tolerance level for discomfort is high enough, do some uncomfortable work against racism, whatever that looks like for you. That might mean going to an organizational meeting where you just sit and listen and learn. It might mean attending a protest. It might mean talking with a family member who doesn't understand how white supremacy works and who contributes racist ideas and energy to the world. As you learn the ways that white supremacy plays out in your life, you will encounter opportunities to act. See how your actions go and what you can learn from them. Then keep working against white supremacy as opportunities present themselves.

Start with your own well-being

Why start here? Because you need liberation as much as anyone else, and you know that there is no liberation for you until there is liberation for all oppressed and devalued people, certainly including people from BIPOC communities. And because, to flip a commonly used religious claim, perfect fear casts out all love. Yes, in the context of white supremacy, that fear is harming members of BIPOC communities far more than it is harming white people. But that fear is harming us too. It is shrinking our spirits, sapping our courage, and leading us to make decisions and take actions, individually and collectively, that are unloving, untrusting, and that lead to human suffering rather than human well-being.

Concrete actions you can take: Educate yourself about the history and present-day reality of racism and as you do so, frequently revisit the question of how racism harms you even as it oppresses and kills members of BIPOC communities. Pay special attention to what white supremacy has cost you, especially psychologically and spiritually. Doing this can be a strange experience because we white people have been taught to stop centering ourselves and to instead

focus on the experiences of people from BIPOC communities, and we need to do that to understand racism, care about it, and work against it. But if we can identify the ways that racism hurts us, we will have new energy and passion for the work.

Start with your self-education

Why start here? Because you cannot be useful until you understand something about the history and present-day reality of white supremacy, both in terms of its impacts on individual members of BIPOC communities and in terms of the larger social and cultural patterns and interpersonal interactions that maintain and reproduce racism daily. Also, you might start here because you are the sort of person who really likes diving in and learning about things and your journey of working against racism should start from a place that has integrity for you.

Concrete actions you can take: Read books, magazines, journals, organization websites, and blogs. Watch videos, TV shows, and movies. Learn from people you know who are from BIPOC communities and who are willing to share their life experiences, insights, and analyses with you. (It is not their job to do this educating; it is on white people to educate ourselves. But when you have meaningful relationships with those who suffer most from racism, there may be times and places when such a conversation would be okay with them. Certainly, when they want you to bear witness to their pain, do so without defensiveness or judgment.) Attend educational public events online and (when safe) in person. There are an incredible number of excellent resources out there; it's just a matter of finding them. As you learn new information and integrate it with the information you already have, you will see new opportunities for intervening and doing more direct work.

Start with your gifts

Why start here? Because we don't all have to be "social justice warriors." Some of us can be social justice artists, using our creativity to work against white supremacy. Some of us can be social justice comedians, using humor to point out the absurdity of white supremacy to people who are not ready to hear about it in other ways. Or we can be social justice accountants, social justice project managers, social justice professors, social justice athletes...the list of ways we can bring our gifts, vocations, and work lives to this struggle is practically endless.

More importantly, if we start with our gifts, we know we are bringing our best selves to the work against white supremacy – the skills that we have spent years developing, the talents that bring us and others such joy when we put them to work (and play). White supremacy is a huge, complex, messy, sprawling, monstrous phenomenon. Bringing only our rough edges, frailties, and sorrows to working against it is not sustainable. We need to bring our strengths, our power, our cleverness, our joy, our training. White supremacy, like all forms of inequality, is both harmful enough and unnecessary enough that it behooves us to bring our best selves to the work against it. Our world and all the people in it deserve our A-game.

Concrete actions you can take: Even if you've done this before, make a list of your gifts and talents, professional and otherwise. Hopefully, this will be a fun and life-affirming exercise. Then take some time to figure out how you can put your gifts and talents to work against white

supremacy. White supremacy is reproduced everywhere, all the time. The main question is how we insert ourselves into the white supremacy around us to slow it down or mitigate the harm it causes. How can your gifts and talents contribute to that work? Once you've identified some ways, take concrete action, see what happens, and decide what's next. (Two small personal examples: I compose justice-focused worship music that I know is used in numerous congregations and other religious settings. I also donate all the money I receive from my music writing (commissions, award money, licensing fees) to racial justice organizations.)

Start with your resources

Why start here? Because we all have resources. We have money. We have cars in many cases. We have expertise. We have relationships. We have those skills and talents previously considered. We have white privilege itself, which means that other white people are likely to see us as more trustworthy, knowledgeable, moral, and otherwise good than they might see people from BIPOC communities, and so give us the benefit of the doubt. The benefit of the doubt is a resource in and of itself. We have (at least some) time and energy. We may have formal authority through our jobs or through volunteer positions that we hold. We can put these resources to work for racial justice as a kind of reparation writ small. And we can encourage others to do the same.

Concrete actions you can take: There are far too many possibilities for me to list many of them here. The below few suggestions are meant to be just that – suggestive. You will have many more ideas grounded in the specifics of your own life.

Donate money to racial justice organizations and buy from businesses owned by members of BIPOC communities. Bank with a credit union or with a bank that does not have an egregious history of racism. (Our household left a major US bank over this issue and now bank with a credit union with a much better record.)

Donate time and energy by volunteering with racial justice organizations and by supporting racial justice opportunities offered by broader organizations (driving people to the polls or doing other get-out-the-vote activities, something I've done via the Democratic Party on a county level).

Research the various communities and organizations with which you interact. Decide whether you need to take some of your time, money, and energy elsewhere to more explicitly anti-racist communities and organizations.

Start with your interactions

Why start here? We interact with other people all the time, and we are certain to come across racist assumptions and comments in our interactions with other white people. We may also see racist mistreatment of members of BIPOC communities in the routine interactions of our days.

Concrete actions you can take: First, educate yourself enough about interactional racism to recognize it when you see it. (The literature on microaggressions is particularly helpful but any

good self-education on white supremacy will include many examples of interactional racism that include obvious discrimination and disrespectful treatment in public places.) Practice interrupting interactional racism, perhaps by role-playing with friends. Finally, commit to interrupting interactional racism when you see it and take the risk of doing it when the opportunity arises. Learn approaches to interruption that radiate compassion and love rather than arrogance and self-importance. Yes, this is very, very hard. But our silence reproduces white supremacy daily.

Start with your social roles

Why start here? We all play many social roles during our daily lives: as family members (parents, grandparents, children, etc.), as friends, as workers, as members of religious communities, as voters (and more broadly as citizens), as shoppers, as healthcare patients...the list goes on. Our social roles often involve interacting with others in institutional and organizational contexts, many times in ritualized ways with specific norms and expectations.

Concrete actions you can take: I've already discussed interrupting interactional racism, which often happens in the context of our social roles (explaining to a friend why what they just said was racist, confronting a store security guard who is following a young Black man around...) Perhaps less obvious are the positive steps we can take against racism from within our social roles:

- As parents and grandparents, we can proactively educate our children and grandchildren about racism.
- As friends, we can educate our friends and invite them to take some of the other steps mentioned in this document.
- As workers, we can try to determine whether our employer is upholding or working against racism and can decide whether and how to raise the issue with those in power in our workplace. If we ourselves have substantial power in our workplaces, we can use it to work with others to make systematic change.
- As voters, we can educate ourselves about candidates and issues and vote in as anti-racist a way as possible, and we can educate others and invite them to do the same.
- As citizens, we can volunteer for voter registration and voter turnout efforts in BIPOC communities or in white communities where people who oppose racism need to be supported in their efforts to vote.
- As shoppers (and customers more broadly), we can put our money where our values are by shopping at and patronizing businesses with anti-racist values and/or that are owned by members of BIPOC communities. This includes banks, insurance companies, healthcare organizations, and other service providers.
- As members of communities of faith, we can build self-education and commitments to action into our liturgy, our faith formation, and other aspects of our formal religious lives.
- And so much more.

Start with other white people

Why start here? Because we're white. And that means several things.

First, it means that we are likely to be around other white people on a regular basis. Second, it means that other white people are likely to give us the benefit of the doubt when we say anything about racism (compared to when someone from a BIPOC community says something) because that's how white privilege works. Third, it means that other white people assume that we are with them in upholding the system of racism that benefits us in so many ways, so our silence in the face of their racism is taken as our consent and approval of it. Finally, it means that if we proactively work with other white people against racism, we are shouldering some of the daily burden of members of BIPOC communities.

Concrete actions you can take: Be that white person who, following substantial self-education and psychological preparation, speaks up often about white supremacy when you are around other white people. Speak especially about the many subtle and egregious ways that racism works, about the profound harm it causes, and about its deep immorality. Other white people may not agree but they will see you as a more neutral, less biased authority on the topic than a person from a BIPOC community (because, again, that's how white privilege works). Be that white person who interrupts another white person making a racist comment or saying something based on a racist assumption. Refuse to silently condone business as usual. Be that white person who takes it on your own shoulders to educate yourself and other white people so people from BIPOC communities don't have to do that work all the time on top of everything else.

Start with your relationships with people from BIPOC communities

Why start here? If you already have such relationships, you can be a source of support, love, kindness, compassion, solidarity, and non-judgmental, non-anxious listening for your friends and loved ones from BIPOC communities. Such acts of care can themselves be a kind of work against white supremacy. If you don't have such relationships, the opportunity is always there to begin building them, for your sake as much as anyone else's.

Concrete actions you can take: Cherish and tend well your relationships with members of BIPOC communities as an opportunity for mutual humanization and community-building. Be someone the members of BIPOC communities already in your life trust to talk to and to whom they know they can speak truthfully. (This means doing the emotional and spiritual work to be resilient rather than fragile when they call you out, which will happen eventually and regularly if they really trust you.) Commit to listening more than you talk and learning more than you teach. As you engage in other work against racism, you are likely to have increased opportunities to build such relationships. Take those opportunities, give thanks for them, benefit from them, and give back accordingly.

Start with your body

Why start here? Honestly, most of us white people don't start here. Most of us get here after a longer or shorter amount of time. But the invitation is always there for us to do this for the first time, or the thousandth. We can use our bodies against racism in many ways, from volunteer work to showing up regularly at racial justice organizational meetings, rallies and protests.

Some of us have physical or emotional challenges that make protesting difficult if not impossible. There are different roles for different people, and if you are not physically able to protest on the front lines, there are many other things you can do – some with your body, others with other resources.

Concrete actions you can take: Attend meetings (of racial justice organizations, of City Council, of your local school board...) Attend rallies and protests. Do political volunteer work or educational volunteer work or any other kind of volunteer work that helps members of BIPOC communities by putting your body and its capabilities to use.

Alternatively, use your body and its talents to create beautiful things that invite others to work against white supremacy. Make art or music or theater or dance. Perform, compose, choreograph. Working against any form of systematic inequality includes envisioning the joyful world of human flourishing that does not yet fully exist and bringing it to life in any ways we can, and creative work is an important way to do that.

Start with where you live

Why start here? That old saying, “Think globally, act locally” has some wisdom to it. We can always send money to national organizations and vote in national elections. At the same time, given how extensive white supremacy is, the odds are that it exists and is being reproduced daily wherever you live and spend your time. If you care about working against white supremacy and you care about your community, take action to allow those two concerns to inform each other.

Concrete actions you can take: Learn about racism in your neighborhood, across whatever institutions and organizations are of most interest to you. Learn about and follow up on volunteer opportunities. Make some noise at City Hall. Support local politicians who understand and are committed to working against white supremacy. Be a wise and compassionate presence against racism in your everyday communities. Become known as a trustworthy supporter of communities working for racial justice.

In closing

We who are white in the US have important roles to play in working against white supremacy. In this document, I’ve tried to suggest a variety of ways that we can do this, but ultimately you will determine the best way or ways for you yourself to help bend the arc toward justice and well-being for members of BIPOC communities.

If you have questions, thoughts, disagreements, or other responses to this essay, I would love to hear them. Please contact me at amanda@amandaudiskessler.com.