

8 Strategies for Engaging Racial Discomfort

(Based on Discussion Guidelines by Shelly Tochluk's Witnessing Whiteness)

Definition of racial discomfort " an intellectual, emotional, and even physical response- ranging from slight unease to deep distress- to a situation in which racial differences or inequities are brought to people's attention. The people involved can identify as members of the same racial group or of different racial groups."

- 1. Acknowledge that "It's a process"** Remember that not everything is obvious to everyone. We may be on a similar journey, but the journey is not linear, and we all at different points. In addition, not everything we say has to be perfectly or fully formulated.
- 2. In speaking about your personal experiences, you should speak from "lower case t"**- Recognize the difference between your truth (with a lower case t) and the idea of the Truth (with an upper case T). Speak from the former. Be respectful that others' experiences may be different from yours.
- 3. Make connections to larger social structures-** It's sometimes helpful and even necessary to share personal experiences and perspectives, but the big picture of history and current social and institutional structures must not be overlooked.
- 4. Share speaking space, and listen actively and respectfully.** – be intentional about listening to what others have to say without racing in your mind to construct a rebuttal. Avoid demonstrating body language that suggests dismissal or disdain while someone is speaking.
- 5. Expressing strong feelings is okay-** Listen to your body when you experience strong emotions: you may feel physically compelled to speak up, or you may wish to ask for a few minutes of personal time to regroup before speaking up. Decide what the appropriate response is for you in that moment. On the other hand, if others express strong feelings, work at not taking them personally.
- 6. Be willing to be vulnerable-** Growth often happens when we are willing to be honest and to share our questions, uncertainties, flaws, and mistakes.
- 7. Be open to notice and explore moments when defensiveness and denial emerge-** Be willing to engage with these moments, ask for a few minutes to collect your thoughts. If you are feeling defensive or resistant, reflect on why you feel that way. On the other hand, if you are feeling strong emotions toward a person exhibiting defensiveness or resistance, reflect on why you feel that way.
- 8. Allow that biases and blind spots do not reflect our character-** They instead reflect the messages we've consumed and the social constructs we have all lived under.

