

Hey, you got a little racism stuck in your teeth.

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<https://nonprofitaf.com/2016/08/flossing-and-the-dental-hygiene-paradigm-of-race-discourse/>

Recently, there was a news story claiming there's no evidence that flossing actually does anything. I fell on the ground weeping with joy. Yes, complete exoneration! Take that, you dentists and dental hygienists, with your judgmental eyes above your mouth covers. Now, I just need to find a study that says exercise is completely useless, and I can keep lounging on the couch, watching Veep and gnawing on an ear of corn and not feel any guilt. (What, like your Saturday nights are sooooo much more exciting).

But dang it, [snopes.com](#) just ran this fact-checking article that says, nope, the study's methodology is flawed, and we still need to floss. Apparently, dental professionals consider not flossing so damaging that it would be unethical to subject a control group to several years of it, hence the lack of evidence of flossing's effectiveness. So, back to the sink for all of us.

So, what does this have to do with anything? With all the tension in our society regarding race, gender identity, sexual orientation, religious freedom, age, ability, and other critical aspects of people's identity, I see more and more of us walking on egg shells. There seems to be so many landmines out there that many of us are terrified of making mistakes and being labeled racist, sexist, ageist, ableist, xenophobic, homophobic, etc. These are all very serious charges, and the fear of being called out makes us want to stay silent, fearing that a single mistake can cost us our reputation, our jobs, our relationships, even the existential core of who we are as decent human beings.

But we cannot advance the discussion on injustice, and thus the solutions for it, if we live in fear of having honest conversations with each other, including being able to admit to our mistakes and not feel like we are terrible people.

This is why I am an advocate of [Jay Smooth](#)'s dental hygiene philosophy when it comes to talking about racism, and by extension, other forms of injustice. To paraphrase Smooth, we have to stop thinking of prejudice the way we think about our tonsils: We get them removed, and that's it, we don't have to worry about them again. If we just attend one training on undoing racism, then we're done, and we are no longer capable of racism. Then we get offended if anyone points out something racist we did or said, because obviously we already

did the hard and painful work of exorcising that ugly part of ourselves and therefore can never again be racist.

But fighting racism is more like brushing our teeth: We personally have to look at our reflection and brush and floss every day. Because if we don't, the plaque will build up, causing all sorts of health problems. At the very least, it'll be embarrassing, having corn and spinach stuck in our teeth without knowing. Says Smooth:

“We don't assume, I'm a clean person therefore I do not need to clean my teeth. Being a clean person is something you maintain and work on every day [...] And when someone suggests to us that we've got something stuck in our teeth, we don't say, 'I have something stuck in my teeth?! But I'm a clean person!'”

That's from his TED talk, below.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbdxeFcQtaU&feature=emb_logo

Recently, my team and I went through a training on microaggression, how to recognize it and how to address it. We discussed the microaggressions we individually experienced, from someone having disparaging comments made about their hair, to someone being told they shouldn't go to graduate school because people of their ethnicity usually don't succeed there (read other real-life examples).

We also each recalled and shared moments when we ourselves were the perpetrators of microaggressions, from calling other immigrants “boaters” to thinking a colleague is from Mexico just because she's Latina, to making assumptions about someone's sexual orientation or gender identity. We've all screwed up, and it was difficult to admit it. Realizing that we all make mistakes allows us to be more open and compassionate with one another.

Everyone seems to be on edge. Even those of us who work for organizations whose missions are to address racism and other forms of systemic injustice are nervous. But fear and anxiety will not lead us to solutions, only integrity and honesty will. Learning from Jay Smooth, and from the various conversations I've had with leaders in the field, I recommend we acknowledge a few things as we work with each other to fight racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, religious intolerance, ageism, and other forms of injustice in our community:

The systemic injustice we are trying to address is extremely complex. All the diversity we have in society in terms of ethnicity, cultures, religions, gender identity, abilities, histories, languages, etc., and all the intersectional dynamics between these factors, make our society, and our work in addressing systemic injustice, extremely complex. None of us will be able to be completely fluent at navigating all this complexity. There's a whole bunch of important stuff where many of are only on the beginner's end of the spectrum.

We all make mistakes, all of us. Because of the complexity, all of us make mistakes all the time. We say insensitive things. We make inappropriate jokes. We assume stuff about people. I myself have made, and continue to make mistakes. None of us are immune to perpetrating behaviors that hurt others. We are all great in some ways, and we all need to improve in other ways.

Just because we make mistakes, it does not mean we're bad people. We need to move out of the mindset that links mistakes to identity. This mindset just makes all of us feel bad, not want to take any risk, not want to admit to our failures, and become defensive when we are challenged, because none of us want to be seen as a bad person. If we make a mistake, we're not automatically a bad person. Let's extend that grace to ourselves, and to others.

If someone points out a mistake we made, it does not mean they hate us. Imagine if you have some black bean hummus stuck in your teeth. Wouldn't you rather that someone let you know, so you can take care of it before you go about your day talking to dozens of people? When it comes to heavy topics like privilege and racism, though, we'd rather not have people point out our mistakes, and we sometimes counter-attack when they do it. Let's think, instead, that they're doing us a favor, and thank them.

It takes more courage to admit to a mistake than to deny and defend it. Being able to admit to our mistakes makes us much more open to reflect on our roles in addressing systemic injustice. Denial and defensiveness are easy. It takes a lot more strength to lower our shields, reflect on our actions and their effects on others, and admit, especially publicly, that we were wrong.

Being a good person is an everyday practice, not a one-time thing. We don't just suddenly become a good person after attending a racism workshop, white privilege training, gender identity webinar, or whatever. These skills take decades to understand and master, if mastery is even possible. Sometimes we relapse and have to make up lost ground. We must practice every day, including reflecting on our failures and learning from them.

Undoing racism and other forms of injustice is a practice we must do every day, like brushing our teeth, according to Jay Smooth. We must look in the mirror constantly. And like brushing, on some days, we're better at it than on others. On occasion, we don't spend enough time, and we still have bits of gross stuff stuck in our chompers even though we feel fresh. Sometimes we're lazy and just gargle with some bourbon and call it a night.

Toothpick

Understanding that we all make mistakes all the time, and that we should help each other out by pointing out mistakes without blaming and shaming, my team and I are starting a practice where we have a word to gently remind someone that what they said or did may be offensive, or worse, perpetuating injustice. "Toothpick!" we say. Already this past week, I had

“Toothpick” called out twice for something I said. We laughed and talked about it, and I learned a couple of important lessons and didn’t feel like a terrible human being.

With all the injustice out there that we are trying to fight, let’s give each other some grace. Let’s admit we don’t know everything and we can’t be perfect. Let’s all lower our defenses and see each other as imperfect human beings trying hard to do some good in a complex world. And when someone says, “Hey, you got a little bit of racism (or sexism, or ableism, or ageism, etc.) stuck in your teeth,” we thank them, do some looking in the mirror to remove it, and continue forward to make our world better.

Let’s keep flossing, both metaphorically, and also literally. That’s the only way we will all have the minty fresh breath of social justice.