

Calling People In About "Violence"

How to do it and why it's important right now

SHOWING UP
for
RACIAL JUSTICE

"What struck me most about those who rioted was how long they waited. The restraint they showed. Not the spontaneity, the restraint. They waited and waited for justice and it didn't come. No one talks about that." - Toni Morrison

A guide for calling in white folks around the violence and property destruction narratives

[Showing Up for Racial Justice \(SURJ\)](#) is committed to anti-racism and to organizing our people. Black folks and other people of color have been calling for anti-racist white people to organize other white people for decades. We are seeing an uprising across the country demanding an end to centuries of white supremacy violence to Black people and communities of color at the hands of the police. This is the time when we as anti-racist white folks must commit to having intentional conversations with the people in our lives and in our newsfeeds who might be on the fence or conflicted about the protests because of narratives of "violence" and looting offered by the Right and many mainstream news outlets. These conversations to "call in" our folks is the work.

We have created this guide as a work-in-progress to offer best practices, talking points, and lines of conversation to explore with other white folks in your life to bring them into the fight for racial justice and to #EndWhiteSilence. We hope you find it helpful and share it with others. We will be updating it as we get more resources, but we know perfectionism can keep us from taking action. We must always be in action.

GOALS:

- To offer concrete responses that call people in who are conflicted about protests because of the "violence" and property damage narrative offered by the Right and center
- To engage folks who are on the fence who may be persuaded in either direction.
- To invite people into or towards racial & social justice movements, not shut people up.

PREP:

- Who are the people you can call for support if these conversations are difficult or don't go the way you want? Who can you scheme and grieve and dream with?

- What's your plan if you get upset or overwhelmed? Will you pause the conversation, breathe, express your emotions?
- Think through some of your stories that may be relevant to the conversation(s):
 - How did you come to believe in police & prison defunding and abolition and racial justice? What moved you?
 - What are your experiences of feeling helpless in the face of injustice? When have you experienced harm and the legal system couldn't or wouldn't help you?
 - What do you know about this person? Have they or someone they know protested? Have they taken action before? If you don't know, how can you ask/learn?
 - What do you know about the topics listed below? What don't you know?
- Remember that you weren't politicized in one conversation, and the person you're talking to won't be either. Success isn't the other person completely changing their mind, it's them being willing to keep talking to you and opening up to your perspective little by little, and being moved toward action little by little.

STARTING THE CONVERSATION:

- Increase the level of connection -- if you're responding to a facebook post, try a direct message, or a text message, or even a phone call.
- If you're calling someone directly, remember that your goal is to invite this person into a longer-term connection to racial justice, not just get them to change their behavior right now. How can this be a transformative experience and not a transactional one? Think about how this can be one in a series of ongoing conversations about policing, prison abolition, and Black lives.
- Ask for consent! That could sound like: "I saw your Facebook post about (xyz) and want to talk to you about it. Is this a good time?" And if they say no, it's not a good time, commit to following up.

DURING THE CONVERSATION:

- As much as possible, turn to curiosity over judgment. We're trying to get to the emotional root and move people into/towards action, not be right.
- Seek empathy and connection, not distancing yourself from the other person.
- Avoid "why" questions because they can make people feel defensive. Instead, try something like "what made you feel that way" or "how did that happen" or "will you tell me more about that".
- You don't need to be the expert! If you don't know something, it's okay to say that, and to commit to learning about it or looking it up. This could be a great way to invite someone to do this work together - "I can look up some information/history about this - would you read it with me and talk about it?"

SOME THINGS YOU MIGHT HEAR + POTENTIAL PROBES

You might hear: “I’m outraged too, but I don’t agree with property destruction/riots/the way they are going about it.”

You might ask or say:

- What upsets you about the protests? What have you seen or heard?
- I’m also outraged about the recent murders -- George Floyd, Tony McDade, Breonna Taylor, Regis Korchinski-Paquet, Nina Pop. And I know these are only recent examples, there are so many more. I feel (focus on emotions and feelings, not analysis or thinking.) What did you feel when you heard about it?
- I’m noticing some folks who are really outraged about damaged property, but didn’t say much about people being murdered. I feel really upset about that because buildings can be rebuilt, but lives can’t be un-taken.
- Have you seen the posts by some of the owners of the businesses that were set on fire? They’ve been saying that they care more about the lives that were taken than about their buildings.
 - “We can rebuild a building, but we will never reclaim the life of George Floyd,” [an article by the daughter of the owner of Gandhi Mahal](#), one of the restaurants that caught fire in Minneapolis:
 - [A Washington, DC restaurant’s response](#) to learning about damage to their store
- Are you hearing at all from people who are organizing or were at protests? I’ve heard or seen on social media/from people at protests that at several peaceful protests the police escalated the situation - by shooting tear gas and pepper spray, by trapping groups of protestors, shooting rubber bullets. At the protest(s) I’ve been at ...
- One thing that feels really hard for me is that it feels like it’s okay to be sad for George Floyd’s family, but it’s not okay to express anger. And I know that both of those feelings are valid. What emotions have you felt about the murders? (Listen & ask follow-up questions.) Have you had an experience like that, where it felt like you couldn’t share everything that you were feeling?

You might hear: “If they want real change, they should vote.” “I just hope all of these people vote in November!”

You might ask or say:

- That reminds me of all of the marches after Trump was elected - that those were about coming together to work for change in other ways besides voting. Did you go to one of those? What was that like? What other strategies have you tried?
- Has it ever been difficult for you to feel heard? Or to get decision-makers to consider your needs and perspective? What was that like? How did you feel? (Ask lots of probing questions.) (If you have a story about this, could be a good place to share here.)
- What is the connection for you between voting and violence by the police?
- What are the issues you’re most concerned about? What are the ways you work for change on those issues?

- Over and over again I've seen politicians say condolences about police murders, then not actually DO anything that reduces police murders -- or worse yet, they don't say anything about it in the first place. The really visible protests right now are making it so that politicians can't keep ignoring police brutality. Have you ever had to fight to be heard by someone? What was that like?
- I agree that we must vote, especially against Trump and white supremacists in office, but it has always taken mass organized movements making demands to make sweeping changes.
 - I know SURJ is doing really powerful work to get people out to vote for racial justice and against white supremacy. Have you been involved in that? Can I help you get involved?

You might hear: “Why are they still out there? The officer was charged.” “They should let the legal system do its job.” “These bad cops need to be held accountable, but I don’t agree with defunding or getting rid of the police.”

You might ask or say:

- When have you or someone you love experienced really deep harm? (Ask about the story. Listen deeply. Probe for more information. Listen for ways that they were able to experience repair, or not, and ways that the legal system served them, or not. Reflect back to them what you heard. Tell a story of when you experienced harm, when the legal system or people in authority didn't or couldn't help.)
- These protests are about more than just charging one person, but are about the ways that the police across the country do not keep Black people safe and actively harm them.
- Have you seen [the article from the owner of the store where George Floyd was murdered?](#) He talks about how he wishes the cops had never been called, and how the store will no longer call the police when they need to resolve something. It really made me think about how we are taught to call the police as the solution, or are even “required” to sometimes by law.
- I feel so frustrated by the legal system, because we're told it's supposed to be fair, and unbiased, but I see over and over again that cops kill Black people and don't face any consequences.

You might hear: “The people I really feel bad for are the business owners who’ve lost everything.”

You might ask or say:

- I don't know what it's like to see my business burned, but it seems like it must pale in comparison to losing a child or a parent or a sibling. (Or, if this is something you've experienced, and you're comfortable sharing it, do.) Buildings, and businesses, and inventory can be rebuilt, often with insurance money, but lives can't be un-taken.
- Have you seen the posts by some of the owners of the businesses that caught fire or were damaged? They've been saying that they care more about the lives that were taken than about their buildings, which can be rebuilt.

- “We can rebuild a building, but we will never reclaim the life of George Floyd,” [an article by the daughter of the owner of Gandhi Mahal, one of the restaurants that caught fire in Minneapolis](#):
- [A Washington, DC restaurant’s response](#) to learning about damage to their store.
- I’m noticing some folks who are really outraged about damaged property but didn’t say much about people being murdered. I feel really upset about that, because buildings can be rebuilt, but lives can’t be un-taken.

You might hear: “The police -- *the good ones* -- support Black Lives Matter, as long as the protestors don’t get violent. Haven’t you seen them taking a knee with the protestors?”

You might say:

- I’ve seen some of those pictures too... I can really see how lots of cops want to show that they care about George Floyd’s life too. But then the same police who are making a symbolic gesture are later in situations where they are tear gassing or pepper spraying, or arresting protestors. And maybe they don’t *want* to be cracking down on protestors, but that’s their job.
Have you ever been in a situation where your job or something else required you to do something that you didn’t feel was right or that hurt someone else? What did that feel like? (Tell your story too, including the emotional part.)
Even when we want to help people, lots of times we can’t, or can’t do it and keep our jobs. And sometimes just by “doing our job,” we’re actually hurting people. This is even more intensified for the police because they literally have power over life and death.
- I think there are probably lots of cops who *want* to help people. And, there are definitely cops who don’t really care, like the cop who kneeled on George Floyd’s neck. It’s really hard to watch that video and believe that cop cared about George Floyd’s life. But there are so many parts of the job of being a cop that are really harmful, even if you want to help.
 - Note: we think this can be a stepping stone to a longer-term conversation about re-imagining public safety, and defunding/divesting from police. Here are some resources you might share/ask to read and talk about over the longer-term:
 - [FAQs for a Police-Free Future from MPD 150](#) (and you can look at the resources tab on their website for more to read!)
 - [Night Out for Safety and Liberation](#)
 - [Movement For Black Lives’ actions](#) around divesting/defunding the police and investing Black communities
 - [These posters by Luna Syenite on Reimagining Public Safety](#)

You might hear: “Well the military is only keeping the peace.” “If the protestors weren’t violent then the government wouldn’t need to call in the military!”

You might ask or say:

- What do you feel when you see the military in the streets? (Share your own feelings here, too.)
- What does keeping the peace mean to you? I keep thinking about the chant, “No Justice, No Peace,” and how for some of us “peace” means going back to “normal.” Like, if we don’t see protests on the news, then things are okay. But George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade, and so many other Black people were killed during what many of us might consider “peace” time. It feels hard for me to feel good about “peace” that is created by armed military.
- Resources you might suggest reading and talking about together:
 - [Troops Stand Down for Black Lives](#): An Open Letter to Recently Activated National Guard Troops from members of About Face: Military Veterans Against the War. Also check out [About Face’s website](#) and [facebook page](#).
 - [One-pager on US Military Expenditures](#) (good for someone who is open to learning/discussion)

[Read more from the Movement For Black Lives about the Week of Action to Defend Black Lives](#). This can also serve as a great resource to share with others in your life as you have these conversations, learn together, and move to action together.

You can sign up to get on SURJ’s email list [here](#) to stay in touch with SURJ and the broader work of racial justice. Also, check out other ways you can take action right now against white supremacy violence by checking out [our Call to Action page](#).