



Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

# How To Address Racism in Your Workplace

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Racism remains a barrier that many people experience in their workplace on a daily basis. Incidents can include being constantly overlooked for promotional opportunities, creating a hostile work environment, using overt criticism, and making comments or acting in a way that asserts stereotypes. If racist acts occur in the workplace, it's important that you address it by acting authentically, transparently, and sensitively. If you have witnessed an act but were not the direct target, this is also important to support those who were affected.

## Ways to address racism barriers or incidents at work

**Document what you experienced or witnessed.** Write down the incident and any details you remember—who said what, what time did it happen, and anyone else who saw it happen. If this isn't an isolated incident, write down all other instances, and the dates and times that they've happened. Even if you don't show the log to anyone else, you'll have a clear account of what has happened.

**Discuss the incident.** This is an optional step, but if you feel close enough to the person who has exhibited racist behaviour, you might take them aside to privately address the incident. This may be an opportunity to clarify whether or not the situation involved miscommunication or negligence of sensitivity. Remember, you are under no obligation to do so. If you were the person who was harmed, it is not your responsibility to open yourself up to further abuse. Judge the situation as you see fit—after all, talking to a co-worker you consider a friend who made an ignorant comment and addressing your manager about racist behaviour are two different scenarios.

**Review your employee handbook.** Request a copy of your organization's diversity and inclusion policy. This will help you understand how reporting works and explain how reports of racism are handled. (If you are an HR manager make sure that your handbook serves as the guide that lists contact information, specific documents required for reporting, and supportive services available to employees including access to your assistance program's counsellors.)

## How to report a barrier or incident of racism

Know that whether or not you report an incident is entirely up to you. Some people do not want to take on the additional labour of having to navigate through an HR process or wish to move on quickly. But it's important to remember that most companies want to know if there is a racism problem in their workplace so that they can fix it. If you speak up, the person who discriminated against you may understand why their behaviour is unacceptable or become aware of biases they didn't know they had. This may spare other people of colour from the same incident in the future.

If you decide to report, identify who you should speak to. This would most likely be your line manager, but if you were not comfortable speaking to them, you could reach out directly to your HR representative.

During the conversation, explain what happened and when, as well as how it's affected you. Allow time for questions. The person you have reported to should help you decide on a course of action such as whether this will be escalated, or whether the person will be spoken to privately.

When the conversation is over, follow up with an email repeating what happened, when it happened, how it's affected you, and what the agreed upon actions were after your meeting so that there is no ambiguity in your account.

It's important to have a support network outside of work that you can lean on. Dealing with discrimination and bias can be emotionally exhausting, and having a community you can draw strength from can be hugely beneficial. Talk to friends or family that aren't connected with your workplace for support. You can also call your assistance program to speak to a caring counsellor.

## **Play a role in helping others become aware of racist behaviours**

If you witness racism being directed at a colleague, you can help play a part in ensuring that racism is not continuously perpetuated in the workplace.

If you were a first-hand witness, tell the person who acted in a discriminatory manner that you don't think their comment is appropriate. Call out stereotypes when you see them, and don't laugh at racist jokes. Check in with the person who has been the target of discrimination. Let them know what you witnessed, and tell them that you are willing to support them in a report to HR or, if they don't want to make a report directly, that you can report it yourself if they would like you to do so. Be sure to respect whatever decision they make.

If you are made aware of a situation after it has happened through a second-hand account, you can support your co-worker by encouraging them to report the incident if they are comfortable doing so. If they are worried about repercussions, you can (with their permission) find out if your HR department has a method for anonymous reporting. You can also ask for a copy of the company's diversity and inclusion policy, and make sure your co-worker knows about internal resources that your company offers. You could even forward them a link to this article if they're unsure of what to do next.

Remember, it is vital that you respect the decision your co-worker makes. If they decide not to report, understand that this is a deeply personal decision. Do not repeat what they told you or gossip about the incident with other co-workers.

Whether you go into a workspace or work from home, work should be a professional place where everyone feels safe, welcome, and free from negative or unhealthy distractions. By speaking out and supporting others, you can help create that environment for all.

*If you are interested in reading more about learning how to address racism in the workplace, you may find that Harvard Business Review article "[Confronting Racism at Work: A Reading List](#)" useful*