

UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS WITH A BLACK MAN

BOOK DIGEST

YOUR PRESENCE IS REQUESTED

How to be an ally

QUESTION

“ON THE DAILY, ON THE STREET, WHAT IS THE BEST WAY FOR ME TO LET SOMEONE KNOW THAT I CARE? THAT I AM AN ALLY? THAT I FEEL THEIR PAIN? I WANT TO LEARN MORE AND TO HELP IF I CAN. WITH SINCERITY, AND COMPASSION, AND WITHOUT COMING ACROSS AS A FAKE WITH AN ULTERIOR MOTIVE?”

“I want you to know that in the last days and hours of my life you inspired me. You filled me with hope about the next chapter of the great American story when you used your power to make a difference in our society. Millions of people motivated simply by human compassion laid down the burdens of division. Around the country and the world you set aside race, class, age, language and nationality to demand respect for human dignity. Representative John Lewis. New York Times Op-Ed.”

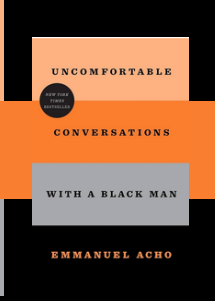
Emmanuel Acho opens this chapter with the story of how this book came to be.

It started after Georges Floyd’s murder, as a video series meant to be called “**Questions White People Have.**” He hoped to gather some black and white people and hold recorded enlightening Q&A.

It turned out to be tricky to organize amidst a pandemic and with friends living all around the country, but one white friend was willing to show up. She traveled to his place and they spent an entire day rehearsing for the first video. Unfortunately by the next morning, she realized that she just couldn’t do it and he had to record the first video alone.

He writes:

“Maybe you’re wondering how you can prove that you’re an ally in more than words? Wherever you are, don’t worry, I got you. I’ll give you my sense of how necessary allies are to the fight against racism and inequality. This fight has always needed white people in the trenches, and that hasn’t changed.”



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LET'S REWIND

Definitions of the word “**ALLY**”:

- From Racial Equity Tools: “Someone who makes the commitment and effort to recognize their privilege (based on gender, race, sexual identity, etc.) and works in solidarity with oppressed groups in the struggle for justice. Allies understand that it is in their own interest to end all forms of oppression, even those from which they may benefit in concrete ways. Allies commit to reducing their own complicity or collusion in oppression of those groups and invest in strengthening their own knowledge and awareness of oppression.”
- From our author: “The simple version is that an ally is a person from an empowered group who acts to help an oppressed group, even if it costs them the benefits of their power.”

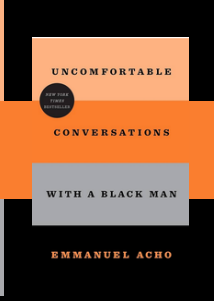
Emmanuel Acho then reviews **the history of allyship** in the US.

It started with the white abolitionists from 1820 to the Civil war: Among them, William Lloyd Garrison founded the abolitionist newspaper ‘The Liberator’ and funded the American Anti Slavery Society. Another key representative at the time was John Brown who staged armed rebellions.

After the civil war, allyship was witnessed in Jim Crow Alabama, when fifteen years before the Montgomery bus boycott, Juliette Hampton Morgan decided to speak out against the unfair treatment through Op-Ed letters in her local newspaper. That cost her her job and she experienced extensive public and private censure. She received threatening letters and phone calls and became estranged from not only her friends but also her mother. The mayor tried to get her fired from her second job and a cross was burned in her front yard. She ended up committing suicide in 1957.

Two athletic allies hold a special place in our author’s heart:

- Peter Norman (silver medalist) stood by Tommie Smith (gold medalist) and Johan Carlos (bronze medalist) when they decided to raise gloved fists in a Black Power Salute, during the medal ceremony. Norman supported their plan, came up with the idea of them splitting Smith’s glove pair when Carlos’s realized he had forgotten his, and he also wore a “Olympic Project for Human Rights” during the ceremony. Smith and Carlos were banned from the Olympics but were welcome back as heroes by their peers. Norman was also shunned from the world of Australian athleticism but he was not celebrated and became a social pariah. However, he remained lifelong friends with Smith and Carlos who were pallbearers at his funeral.



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- Chris Long, a white defensive for the Philadelphia Eagles, always supported his teammate Malcolm Jenkins, a safety, who was a vocal advocate and leader for the Black lives Matters movement, by lifting his fist too or putting his hand on Jenkins's shoulder.

Now our author shares some words of caution for white folks:

“What you don’t want your allyship to become is an instance of the white savior complex.”

He explains that a “white savior” is someone who helps with self-serving intentions. It implies that black people could not possibly save themselves, hence the need for a black savior.

He shares examples portrayed in movies such as Hidden Figures, where Kevin Costner smashes a “colored bathroom” sign—an event that never happened fabricated into a true story—or The Help, in which Emma Stone plays a civil right activist advocating for the experiences of black maids. He also reminds us of Atticus Finch and adds:

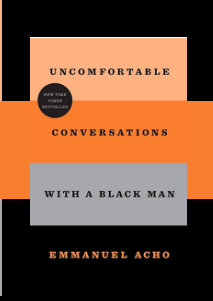
“I know that book is close to a lot of you. But trust me, there’s a real danger in centering our narratives of racial struggle on well-intentioned white people, one articulated well by writer Teju Cole in his essay: “The White Savior Industrial Complex.” Cole writes, “What innocent heroes don’t always understand is that they play a useful role for people who have much more cynical motives. The White Savior Industrial Complex is a valve for releasing the unbearable pressures that build in a system built on pillage.”

Indeed, white saviorism can be used to make it seem like the status quo is mostly fine.

The main point is to make sure that allyship comes from a pure place. He adds:

“Do good work, but don’t make the mistake of caring more about your intentions than about the impact of your intentions, or seeking out gratitude or praise. Make sure you’re not engaged in optical allyship.”

And it’s important to remember that allyship is not a one-time thing but a life-long commitment.



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LET'S GET UNCOMFORTABLE

Tough internal monologues are the foundations of allyship. And allyship for white person must also include holding other white people accountable for their own inner work.

“True allyship demands that it move from conversation to action.”

He highlights:

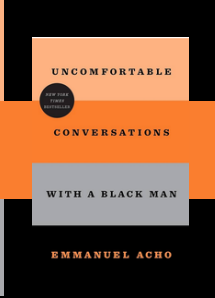
“Know that when you say you are an ally, you are saying that you are willing to risk your white privilege in the name of justice and equality for marginalized voices.”

And he reminds everyone that being an ally is tricky.

He reflects on how his friend had a last minute change of heart and did not join him for the video series (a video that would get twenty-five millions views within only two weeks), and how he can understand her choice but black people do not have that luxury.

That's why, he adds:

“The lesson there is that being an ally means showing up.”



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TALK IT, WALK IT

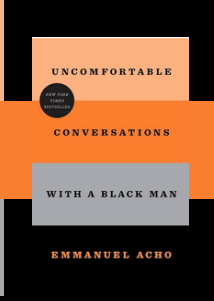
Our author reminds us that allyship starts with education and shares, as usual, a lot of very helpful resources:

- **Books:** Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-Crete Race in the Twenty-First Century, by Dorothy Roberts; The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America, by Khalil Gibran Muhammad. The bluest Eye, by Toni Morrison; Native Son, by Richard Wright.
- **Essays:** “The Case for Reparations”, by France E. Kendall; “How to Talk to Relatives Who Care More About Looting Than Black Lives”, by Rachel Miller; “100 Things White People Can Do for Racial Justice”, by Corinne Shutack.
- **Podcast:** Code Switch, by NPR.
- Everything that was covered in the book!
- **Action calls:** Owning our spheres of influence, attending a protest, making sure that kids don’t grow up only surrounded by whiteness (including at school), checking whether political candidates support unjust policies, organizing initiatives toward racial justice, having those uncomfortable conversations—especially with those who are stubborn about race, and making sure that whatever anyone does is done with the counsel of black people.

“Remember, if you’re reading this, I’m counting you as an aspiring ally. Starting wherever you are is okay.
Heck, reading this book is a great choice.

Every protest you attend, each time you stick up for a black person on your job, every person with whom you have a real conversation about race, all of those things are marks in the win column.

The important thing is to just keep showing up.”



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BREAKING THE HUDDLE

How to End Racism

QUESTION

“WHAT IS YOUR VISION FOR RACE RELATIONS IN THIS COUNTRY? SOME OF THE OBVIOUS THINGS, SUCH AS ELIMINATION OF POLICE BRUTALITY AND SYSTEMIC RACISM, ARE CRITICALLY IMPORTANT, BUT ARE THEY ASPIRATIONAL? IS THAT THE DREAM, OR IS THERE MORE TO BE ACCOMPLISHED?”

ITW by Stephen Colbert with author and Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, 2014:

“It’s just a human race. Scientifically, anthropologically. Racism is a construct—a social construct. And it has benefits: money can be made off it. People who don’t like themselves can feel better because of it. It can describe certain kinds of behavior that are wrong or misleading. So, it has a social function. Racism. But race can only be defined as a human being.”

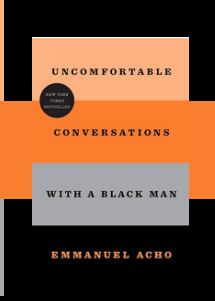
Emmanuel Acho explains what a huddle is in football: that’s when the middle linebacker (the role our author played) gathers the other 10 players so that anyone can know what will be their responsibility to execute during the game. It’s a vital part of the game and that’s what Emmanuel Acho did for us all with this book. However, it’s not the game itself! We now all have to go do our parts.

“I’ve announced the plays, and while the chapters may speak to different readers in different ways, the time is almost here for all of us to go run the play. Because, ultimately, it’s not about the huddle; it’s about what you do after you break.”

He then shares the story of picking up biking during the pandemic. He had bought himself some brand new equipment and believed he was all set. But having not biked since he was a young person, he had completely forgotten about the gear shifter and struggled his way upon a hill, until one of his neighbors came to his rescue. He uses this metaphor to illustrate that if we’re going to end racism, we must look for the gears we haven’t used yet.

People used to believe that slavery would never end. People then believed we would never elect a black president. So things do evolve! However, he also highlights that:

“Racism has been shapeshifting, and fighting it demands vigilance against its many changing forms.”



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It has been around for 400 years, and it's highly adaptable: racism is not a small problem. BUT it's a man-made problem, which means we can find a solution.

LET'S REWIND

This book's content falls in three categories.

Covered in part 1—[Racism at the individual level](#): Act and expression of

- Discrimination,
- Stereotyping,
- Ignorance,
- Hate.

Covered in part 2—[Systemic racism](#): the unfair policies, practices, and procedures of institutions that produce racially inequitable outcomes for black people and POC, while also yielding advantages for white people.

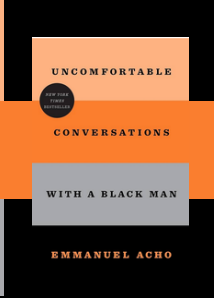
The third level goes beyond part 3: It actually runs under everything that was covered in the book. That's [INTERNALIZED racism](#). It explains how some people of color can end up supporting white privilege and power, and how they can be driven to accept the status quo or even doubt who they are and/or each other.

After summarizing the main messages of the book, he reflects on how the Black Lives Matter movement follows in the footsteps of the abolitionist and then civil right movements. He adds:

“In all of those campaigns, black people have needed white allies, white people who’ve been willing to take on the issue of oppression and racism as their own, even when it meant giving up some of their privileges.”

He reminds us that “white people” were not a thing (or a “race”) before 1681 when marriages between Europeans and others were outlawed. Before that, people focused on their nation of origin. He writes:

“Let’s think about what this means: race was a political creation, an economic creation—all this hate developed to secure the interest of some seventeenth-century dudes who wanted to get rich growing sugarcane and cotton, who wanted to make sure they’d always be the class on top. Which is to say racism has always been about power. Which is to say, we invented racism. Which is to say, maybe we can uninvent it, too.”



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“Let me tell you what the movement for racial equality can’t afford: white people being fragile about racial issues. The premise of this book is about putting those issues on the table, about engaging with tough conversations, about white people having to sit with the discomfort, because that’s how progress is made. This is not to say I want or intentionally hurt a white person’s feelings. On the contrary, I want to move us toward healing.”

Finally he reminds parents of white kids about how important it is to talk about race with them. And color and ethnicity is an important part of one’s identity, so denying it is denying a part of someone’s humanity. The goal is not to erase our differences, but to embrace and celebrate them.

“We must see colors to see racism.”

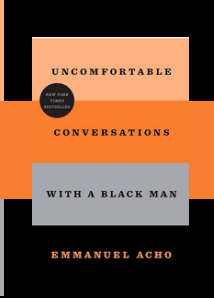
LET’S GET UNCOMFORTABLE

Emmanuel Acho hopes we had those uncomfortable conversations with others too while reading this book.

He reminds us that white privilege can show up in unconscious ways in conversations and urges white people to stay wary when talking to a black person! [Here are some guidelines:](#)

- To not dominate the conversations
- To not try reframing or reinterpreting what black people and POC are saying
- To not ask them to calm down and to understand their emotions
- To listen deeply
- To not refocus the conversations around other forms of privilege: as he highlights, “**this is not the oppression Olympics**”—and if intersectional discussions are crucial and warranted, the goal is not to refocus the current conversation away from race-based problematics
- To ensure confidentiality
- To use “I” statements
- To identify when to step back & quiet down

He also reminds anyone on their allyship journey to pace themselves. It’s not a one time deal but a lifelong pursuit.



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TALK IT, WALK IT

He ends this book with the heartwarming story of how one of his closest friends, Brittney (a white woman) and one of his best friends, Morolake (a black woman), threw him a surprise “welcome to Los Angeles” party.

Surrounded by 17 smiling faces, he noticed he was walking his talk. Indeed, he was surrounded by 8 white friends, 7 black friends, one Mexican friend and a friend of mixed race.

He shares:

“I realized that I was living out what I’m promoting on the show, and that was a great feeling. Because in that room were white, black, Mexican, and mixed people, and we were all there eating and laughing and talking and enjoying each other’s company.”

He hopes the world will look more and more like his kitchen that night.

*“A world without racism is being in one country,
on one continent,
in one world celebrating life together,
wherever we’ve come from to get here.”*

He concludes:

“Ending racism is not a finish line that we will cross.

It’s a road we’ll travel.”