

Responding with Empathy: How You Can Support Your BIPOC Colleagues in the Wake of Racially Motivated Aggression

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On May 14, 2022, an armed shooter entered a Tops Friendly Market grocery store in Buffalo, New York, and killed ten Black people in a racially motivated act of domestic terrorism. This event is unfortunately far from unique in America's recent history. It is one more incident in a series of racially motivated killings that have rocked the Black community over the past few years. The Asian American community has also seen a significant rise in racially motivated violence since the advent of COVID-19.

Why should you care? And how are these events so different from all the bad things going on in the world? Because, your Black and Asian colleagues are dealing with all of those things going on in the world too but they are also dealing with racism and race-based aggression elsewhere.

Race based aggression is particularly harmful to Black, Indigenous, and other people of color ("BIPOC"), even when they are not directly acquainted with the victim(s), because (a) it serves as a strong reminder of the disparities in the experiences of underrepresented ethnic groups in America compared to their white counterparts; (b) since the sole consideration for such acts of aggression is race, people that share the same racial identity tend to identify more with the victims and thus also feel similarly threatened; and (c) given the proliferation of such acts of aggression in recent years, the event in question may mirror a real life experience of members of their family and immediate community.

Reading or hearing about an act of race based aggression or violence against someone that shares the same racial identity may invoke heightened stress responses in BIPOC individuals, such as a heightened sense of danger, PTSD, chronic stress, anxiety, depression, burnout, and other mental health issues. Some of these issues may ultimately result in physical symptoms, such as digestive problems, physical pain, hypertension, accelerated wear and tear of the body caused by chronic stress, or cardiac issues.

This is important to remember when events such as the Buffalo shooting occur because they present an opportunity for both individuals and organizations to show solidarity and empathy to BIPOC colleagues. Such responses, in turn, inform BIPOC colleagues' perception of those they work with as allies, mentors, leaders, friends, or colleagues. And, on an organizational level, responding with acknowledgement and empathy to such situations may have a significant influence on employee retention (or the lack of it), especially in relation to employees within the affected racial or ethnic groups.

Here are a few things that you can do to provide this type of support:

1. *Validate Them*: Feeling seen and heard is important for mental health. Validation involves giving the person in question space to feel less than okay, where they don't



have to pretend that everything is fine in order to make you comfortable. Instead of choosing to act like a tragic event didn't occur, respond with empathy and ask yourself a few simple questions: "If I were this person, how would I feel? How would I like to be treated? What would I like to hear or see?"

2. *Communicate Your Support:* People deal with trauma in various ways. While some may need time to process, others may need to hear words of validation or support. Yet others may need to see actions that show support rather than simply hear supportive words. The most important thing is to show an intent to provide support, however that may look. In some cases, it may be as simple as reaching out and asking how you can be supportive or offering to be a sounding board if they ever feel like talking. Showing support may also take the form of an action such as those described below. In any case, regardless of how you engage and show support be mindful to ensure that your BIPOC colleague feels that they can communicate their needs or feelings without fear of having their words used against them.
3. *Back Your Words with Action:* If you offer words of encouragement, but counter those words with conflicting actions, judgement, or inaction where action is expected, those words may turn out to be more harmful than saying nothing. Below are some examples of actionable steps you can take to show support:
 - a. Consider extending deadlines, if you have the flexibility;
 - b. If you are in a non-supervisory role, offer to cover for the affected person for some hours or a day, so they can take some time to process the event;
 - c. Perform a kind act, such as driving the colleague home instead of letting them take public transportation that day, offering to accompany them somewhere to show solidarity and facilitate a stronger sense of safety, taking them out for coffee or drinks if they feel up to it, or some other gesture of kindness that may increase the person's feeling of collegiality or safety;
 - d. If you have an office engagement planned such as a lunch, happy hour, or even an evaluation soon, reach out and ask if they feel up to attending or offer to reschedule the event to another day or week;
 - e. Instead of an in-person or camera-on Zoom meeting, offer to conduct meetings by phone or with the camera off to relieve the pressure to look or act like something tragic hasn't happened.
4. *Commit to Doing Better:* We often think of anti-racism or allyship as something that only people in leadership or the government can do. The truth is that each and every one of us has a chance to be anti-racist on a daily basis by showing up for people who have less privilege than we do and by making space for them. All it takes is being intentional in our day to day activities, to treat others with respect, and to foster equity and inclusion wherever we can. A few examples:



- a. Give or share credit when earned;
- b. Make space for others by saying their names (in a positive way) in rooms where they are not represented;
- c. Speak up when you hear something unfair or racist being said;
- d. When presented with a complaint regarding racial bias or racism, resist the urge to center your own experiences and perceptions above those of the underrepresented person (e.g. avoid using words such as “you must have misunderstood the situation” or “I know [*insert name*] and there must have been a mistake” or “they aren’t that kind of person”). Instead, practice active listening, rely on facts, and treat complaints of racial bias as any other valid complaint where everyone involved is given a fair chance to be heard; and
- e. Interrupt yourself and others when you find yourself or others making assumptions that are not based in fact.

By being intentional about showing support and empathy to others in times of need, we can contribute to a happier, healthier, and more productive work environment for our BIPOC colleagues and everyone else too.