**<https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/white-womens-tears-and-the-men-who-love-them-twlm/>**

**White Women’s Tears and the Men Who Love Them**

September 19, 2015 by [Dr. Robin DiAngelo](https://goodmenproject.com/author/robin-diangelo/)

***White tears are a reminder to people of color that white people don’t notice racism on a daily basis; we only notice racism when the media presents it to us loudly enough.***—

There has been much critique lately of “white tears.” This term refers to all of the ways, both literally and metaphorically, that white people cry about how hard racism is on *us*. In my work, I consistently encounter these tears in their various forms, and many writers have provided excellent critiques. Here, I want to address one specific manifestation of white tears: those shed by white women in cross-racial settings.

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The following example illustrates both people of color’s frustration with those tears and white women’s sense of entitlement to freely shed them. When another police shooting of an unarmed black man occurred, my workplace called for an informal lunch gathering of people who wanted to connect and find support. Just before the gathering, a woman of color pulled me aside and told me that she wanted to attend but she was “in no mood for white women’s tears today.” I assured her that I would handle it. As the meeting started, I told my fellow white participants that if they felt moved to tears, to please leave the room. I would go with them for support, but asked that they not cry in the mixed group. After the discussion, I spent the next hour explaining to a very outraged white woman why she was asked not to cry in the presence of the people of color.

I understand that expressing our heartfelt emotions—especially as they relate to racial injustices—is an important progressive value. To repress our feelings seems counter-intuitive to being present, compassionate, and supportive. So why would my colleague of color make such a request? In short, because white women’s tears have a powerful impact in this context, effectively reinscribing rather than ameliorating racism. To make sense of how this happens we have to first understand what racism actually is.

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Contrary to dominant culture’s definition of racism as isolated and individual acts of meanness based in racial prejudice, sociologists recognize racism as a system of racial inequity between white people and people of color, with white people as the beneficiaries of that system. This system does not depend on individual actors with bad intentions. Because most bias is implicit (or unconscious) and built into our institutions, racism is reproduced automatically. In order to interrupt racism, we need to recognize and challenge the norms, structures, and institutions that keep it in place. But because they benefit us, racially inequitable relations are comfortable for most white people. Therefore, as white people who want to interrupt this system, we have to get racially uncomfortable and be willing to examine the effects of our racial engagement. This includes not indulging in whatever reactions we have in a given cross-racial encounter—such as anger, defensiveness, or self-pity—without first reflecting on what is driving them and how they will impact others.

[White Fragility](https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/white-fragility-why-its-so-hard-to-talk-to-white-people-about-racism-twlm/) is the term I use to describe the inability of white people to respond constructively when our racial positions are challenged. Because we so seldom encounter this challenge, we are thrown off balance and withdraw, defend, cry, argue, minimize, ignore, and in other ways push back in order to regain our racial equilibrium. These emotions and the actions that result from them are always political because we are not outside of culture. Our experiences are filtered through a particular cultural lens. This lens determines how we interpret the experience. In turn, our interpretation drives our behavioral responses. These behaviors affect those around us. We are not unique individuals interacting in a social vacuum. We have to look beyond ourselves and recognize our socio-political context. Our emotional reactions in cross-racial settings and the behaviors they inform have an impact to which we must attend.

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White men of course, enact white fragility, but I have not seen it manifest as literal crying in these settings. Their fragility most commonly manifests as varying forms of dominance and intimidation:

* Control of the conversation by speaking first, last and most often;
* Arrogant and disingenuous invalidation of racial inequality via “just playing the devil’s advocate”;
* Simplistic and presumptuous proclamations of “the answer” to racism (“People just need to…”);
* Playing the outraged victim of “reverse racism”;
* Accusations that the legendary “race card” is being played;
* Silence and withdrawal;
* Hostile body-language;
* Channel-switching (“The true oppression is class!”);
* Intellectualizing and distancing (“I recommend this book…”).

All of these moves function to get race off the table, regain control of the discussion and end the challenge to their positions.

Yet because of its seeming innocence, one of the more pernicious enactments of white fragility occurs when well-meaning white women cry in cross-racial interactions. The reasons we cry in these interactions vary. Perhaps we were given feedback on our racism. Not understanding that unaware white racism is inevitable, we hear that feedback as a moral judgement and our feelings are hurt.

A classic example occurred in a workshop I was co-leading. A black man who was struggling to express a point referred to himself as stupid. My co-facilitator, a black woman, gently countered that he was not stupid but that society would have him believe that he was. As she was explaining the power of internalized racism, a white woman interrupted with, “What he was trying to say was…” When my co-facilitator pointed out that the white woman had reinforced the racist idea that she could best speak for a black man, the woman erupted in tears. The training came to a complete halt as most of the room rushed to comfort her and angrily accuse the black facilitator of unfairness (even though participants were there to learn how racism works, [how dare the facilitator point out an example of how racism works!](https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/white-fragility-and-the-rules-of-engagement-twlm/)) Meanwhile, the black man who was the victim of her micro-aggression was left alone to watch.

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A colleague of color shared an example in which a white woman was offered a full-time position as the supervisor of the women of color who had trained her. When the promotion was announced, the white woman tearfully requested support from the women of color as she embarked on her new learning curve. She likely saw her tears as an expression of humility about the limits of her knowledge and expected support to follow. The women of color had to deal with the injustice of the promotion, the invalidation of their abilities, and the lack of racial awareness of the white person now in charge of their livelihoods. While trying to manage their own emotional reactions they were put on the spot; if they did not make some comforting gesture, they risked being viewed as angry and insensitive (see [abagond](https://abagond.wordpress.com/2010/06/11/white-womens-tears/)).

The following are some of the reasons why white women’s tears in cross-racial interactions are problematic:

* There is a long historical backdrop of black men being tortured and murdered based on a white woman’s distress and we bring these histories with us. Our tears trigger the terrorism of this history, particularly for African Americans. As my colleagues of color have said, “When a white woman cries, a black man gets hurt.” Not knowing or being sensitive to this is another example of white centrality, individualism and lack of racial humility.
* Whether intended or not, when a white woman cries over some aspect of racism, all the attention immediately goes to her, demanding time, energy and attention from everyone in the room when they should be focused on ameliorating racism. While she is attended to the people of color are yet again abandoned and/or blamed. As [Stacey Patton](http://www.damemagazine.com/2014/12/15/white-women-please-dont-expect-me-wipe-away-your-tears) states in her excellent critique of white women’s tears, “Then comes the waiting for us to comfort and reassure them that they’re not bad people.” That is analogous to first responders at the scene of an accident rushing to comfort the person whose car struck a pedestrian, while the pedestrian lies bleeding on the street.
* In a common, but particularly pernicious move of perverting the racial order, racism becomes about white distress, white suffering, and white victimization.
* Because we so seldom have authentic and sustained cross-racial relationships, our tears do not feel like solidarity to people of color we have not previously shown up for. Instead, our tears function as impotent reflexes which don’t lead to constructive action.
* Tears that are driven by white guilt are self-indulgent. When we are mired in guilt we are narcissistic and ineffective; guilt functions as an excuse for inaction.
* White tears are a reminder to people of color that white people don’t notice racism on a daily basis; we only notice racism when the media presents it to us loudly enough. We need to reflect on when we cry and when we don’t, and why. In other words, what does it take to move us?
* Since many of us have not learned how racism works and our role in it, our tears may come from shock and distress about what we didn’t know or recognize. For people of color, our tears are an enactment of our racial insulation and privilege. But because we see our tears as specific to us as individuals, we take offense when people of color find them problematic. In turn, based on past experience, people of color who question us can now anticipate some form of backlash.
* Freely expressing our immediate emotions without attention to impact demonstrates that as white people, we have not had to think about the effects of our engagement on people of color. While white women cannot cry in the white male-dominated corporate culture without penalty, in cross-racial interactions we are in the power position. Thus, we have not had to rein in or control our racial responses and can indulge in them whenever and however we want. In fact, we feel completely entitled to require people of color to adapt to us and our white fragility. Much like white women in a white male-dominated corporate environment, people of color have to manage their feelings in ways that keep white people comfortable or suffer the consequences.

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| “[Black people] are only allowed to have feelings for the sake of your entertainment, as in the presentation of our funerals. And even then, there are expectations of what is allowed for us to express. We are abused daily, beaten, raped, and killed, but you are sad and that is what is important.” |

I asked the woman of color I referred to in the opening of this article if I had missed anything in this list. This was her response:

“It’s infuriating because of its audacity of disrespect to our experience. You are crying because you are uncomfortable with your feelings when we are barely allowed to have any. You are ashamed or some such thing and cry, but we are not allowed to have any feelings because then we are being difficult. We are supposed to remain stoic and strong because otherwise we become the angry and scary people of color. We are only allowed to have feelings for the sake of your entertainment, as in the presentation of our funerals. And even then, there are expectations of what is allowed for us to express. We are abused daily, beaten, raped and killed but you are sad and that’s what is important. That’s why it is sooooo hard to take.”

**The men who love us**

In addition to the general dynamics discussed thus far, White women’s tears in cross-racial discussions have a very specific effect on men. I have seen our tears manipulate men of all races, but the consequences of this manipulation are not the same. White men occupy the highest positions in the race and gender hierarchy. Thus, they have the power to define their own reality and that of others. This reality includes not only whose experiences are valid, but who is fundamentally valid *herself*.  In the [white racial frame](http://www.racismreview.com/blog/2008/05/25/the-white-racial-frame-what-is-it/), not all women are deemed worthy of recognition. For example, contrary to popular white mythology, white women have been the primary beneficiaries of affirmative action, not people of color. I believe this is because when forced, white men could acknowledge white women’s humanity; white women were their sisters, wives and daughters. And of course through these relationships, white women’s increased access to resources benefited white men.

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| By legitimating white women as the targets of harm, both white men and women accrue social capital. People of color are abandoned and left to bear witness as the resources meted out to white people actually increase-yet again-on their backs. |

White men also get to authorize what constitutes pain and whose pain is legitimate. When white men come to the rescue of white women in cross-racial settings, patriarchy is reinforced as they play savior to our damsel in distress. By legitimating white women as the targets of harm, both white men and women accrue social capital. People of color are abandoned and left to bear witness as the resources meted out to white people actually increase—yet again—on their backs.

Men of color may also may come to the aid of white women in these exchanges, and are likely also driven by their conditioning under sexism and patriarchy. But men of color have the additional weight of racism to navigate. This weight has historically been deadly. For black men in particular, the specter of [Emmett Till](https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/death-emmett-till-erink/) and countless others who have been beaten and killed over a white woman’s claims of cross-racial distress is ever present. Ameliorating the woman’s distress as quickly as possible may be felt as a literal matter of survival. Yet coming to the rescue of a white woman also drives a wedge between men and women of color. Rather than receive social capital that reinforces his status, a man of color put in this position must now live with the agony of having to support racism in order to survive.

**In conclusion**

White people do need to feel grief about the brutality of white supremacy and our role in it. In fact, our numbness to the racial injustice that occurs on a daily basis is key to holding it in place. But our grief must lead to sustained liberatory action. Because they are indicators of where we need to work on our racial identities, our emotions can serve as entry points into the deeper self-awareness that leads to this action. Examining what is at the root of our emotions (shame for not knowing, guilt for hurting someone, hurt feelings because we think we must have been misunderstood), will enable us to address those roots. We also need to examine our responses towards other people’s emotions and how they may re-inscribe race and gender hierarchies.

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| While we cannot control how our tears impact others, we need to find ways that don’t privilege our immediate emotional needs over the needs of people of color. This work should take place with other white people or within an authentic, mutual relationship with a person of color who has agreed to assist us. |

As we develop our racial consciousness we learn how to express our emotions in ways that do not continually center whiteness. While we cannot control how our tears impact others, we need to find ways that don’t privilege our immediate emotional needs over the needs of people of color. This work should take place with other white people or within an authentic, mutual relationship with a person of color who has agreed to assist us. Affinity groups are especially constructive spaces to do our grieving. Contact Showing Up for Racial Justice ([SURJ](http://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/)) or [European Dissent](http://www.pisab.org/programs) for information on how affinity groups work and where to find them.

We can assume that our racial socialization sets us up to reproduce racism regardless of our intentions or self-image. Our task is figuring out how that happens, not if. Crying in racial discussions is often viewed from a white perspective as a supportive gesture of shared experience. But in the context of cross-racial discussion about racism, no form of white engagement that is not informed by an antiracist perspective is benign. Going against our reflexive and unexamined responses is difficult and often counter-intuitive, but it is necessary and will result in the least harmful and most authentic engagement.