

Erasing Racism

WHAT IS RACISM?

Racism is a combination of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination that makes some people think they are superior to people of other ancestries. It attacks an individual's dignity. It is demeaning and debilitating. Having to live and work in an environment of overt or covert discrimination can cause victims to suffer a range of physical and mental health problems. Racism is hurtful behaviour that can scar people for life.

Because racists see "different" as "inferior," they quickly conclude that other people's religions, cultures, and nationalities should take a back seat to their own. Racism is largely based on misunderstanding and fear of differences. Sometimes this lack of understanding is referred to as cultural blindness – our inability to accurately see, hear and interpret other cultures.

And racism is usually, but not exclusively, practised by groups that have social, economic, or political power.

A *stereotype* is a generalization used to define a group of people based only on the words or deeds of one member of the group. When we over-simplify an individual or a group through generalizations, we've stereotyped, not bothering to consider the differences between all of us.

Prejudice is an attitude, almost always negative, about a whole group of people. Prejudice is a pre-judgment based on stereotypes that we create with incomplete or inaccurate facts.

Discrimination can be the result of stereotyping and prejudice. It's the action we take against others that humiliates or belittles them, or puts them at a disadvantage. Discrimination denies people benefits and opportunities that other people enjoy in areas like housing, employment, education and public services.

We all have stereotypes and prejudices and we're all guilty of committing racism based on those beliefs at one time or another. We may not have acted deliberately. Most likely, we didn't consciously think our skin colour or religion, for example, was better than somebody else's.

IDENTIFYING RACISM

Some kinds of racism aren't hard to identify. When racist behaviour is overt, or out in the open, it's plain to see. This kind of racism is blatant; it's usually loud and arrogant. For example, it's a sign that says "No Foreigners Need Apply," swastikas spray-painted on a synagogue, name-calling or, at its worst, physical assault.

Sometimes people make covert racist decisions. You don't hear the words but you see the results clearly. A real-estate agent, for instance, makes a deal with a seller not to show a house to visible minorities. Or an employment agency agrees not to refer non-whites to a certain employer.

We often don't recognize racism because it can be subtle. Nothing is said directly, but the job or service or apartment is denied based on stereotyping or prejudice.

Discrimination is not less harmful because we are unaware of it. In a way, it's more destructive because if we can't see ourselves or others doing it, we can't stop it.

Worse still, discrimination is often built right into our social, political and economic systems.

Systemic discrimination, as it is called, is a continuation of traditionally accepted practices that keep certain groups from fully participating in the workplace, in our schools, and in many other social institutions. It's particularly hard to get rid of because over time it becomes a "natural" part of the way we do things.

Consider, for example, the common practice of word-of-mouth hiring. It provides an advantage to people who participate in the same informal networks as current employees, and excludes groups who have historically been under-represented in the workplace.

A school system designed for the needs of the dominant culture will not provide equality of educational benefit to Aboriginal children and visible minorities. Work schedules and dress codes can discriminate against certain religious minorities such as Muslims, Sikhs or Jews. Health care providers will not provide equality of service if they cannot respond to the diverse cultural, religious and language needs of their clients.

WE CAN STOP RACISM

Despite a variety of laws and programs designed to fight racism and racial discrimination, these evils continue to thrive in Canada. While anti-racist laws and policies are a step in the right direction, they are not enough. The struggle to eliminate racism really starts with the individual.

Whether you are a victim, witness or perpetrator, it's your responsibility to say no to racism, to reject it, and to fight against it. The truth is, when we see racism and do nothing about it we become part of the problem.

RACISM IS AGAINST THE LAW

While the battle against racism begins with individual attitudes and behaviour, there are also laws designed to stop people from acting on their prejudices, from discriminating against others.

Under *The Saskatchewan Human Rights Code*, it's illegal for any employer, educational institution or service provider under provincial jurisdiction to discriminate on the basis of race or perceived race, colour, ancestry, nationality, place of origin, or religion in schools, housing, public services, contracts, or publications, or on the job.

The Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission enforces the *Code* to protect victims of discrimination, and provides public education to prevent discrimination from happening. If you believe you are a victim of racial discrimination, the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission can help.

SAY NO TO RACISM

Racism, and the discrimination it leads to, prevents millions of Canadians from achieving social equality. Cultural diversity is a fact of life in Canada – it's what makes our country so rich.

Everyone has a responsibility to reject racism and to support those who are victimized. It's time to take that responsibility seriously and say no to racism.



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