

## HELLO!

Please find answers to the questions we couldn't get to during the "Dignity and Your Relationships" Webinar we held last week.

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[Explore this Guide on Using Dignity to Confront Racism](#)

1. **I am glad that you mentioned race. I am always having to prove that I am not going to hurt you, especially in an office setting. What's the best way to handle this?**

Before you engage in conversations, I would encourage you to start with thinking about your boundaries and your emotional bandwidth. Then look to dignity as the way to frame your possible conversation. This framework is meant to give you a tool kit to effectively confront racism and bias to protect and elevate the Dignity of others.

Treating someone with dignity can feel really hard because it asks us to remember everyone matters and is equally vulnerable to feeling like they don't. It is a practice that requires work so you have the skills to have productive conversations; even if you disagree with the other person or you don't feel the other person is acknowledging your Dignity.

Rooting conversations in the definition of dignity and the [Elements of Dignity](#) is the way to start. When you approach the person, tell them you'd like to talk about race and bias using dignity as your framework and ask them if they are open to a discussion with you. Explain that the reason you want to use dignity as your framework is because it gives everyone shared language to share feedback and ask questions with structure that isn't rooted in individual character and doesn't weaponize shame. If they say no or are unable to follow the framework, then you have the right to say you don't want to continue the conversation at the present time.

Choosing to have these conversations is very different than feeling like you're being forced to participate.. When people from marginalized groups in professional or educational settings, are asked to speak for "their" group or educate others without additional compensation for the emotional labor that requires is a violation of dignity. In addition, if you are from a marginalized group and being called into conversations without acknowledging your identity, prioritizing your emotional safety, or including the expectation/understanding that colleagues participate in their own education. If you are Black, a person of color, or from a marginalized group, are you being asked to prioritize the emotional safety of your colleagues above your own? If so, disengage, ask for support, or draw a firm boundary that educating colleagues on race, bias, and oppression is not your responsibility. Is it your job to be having these conversations with your colleagues? If not, tap in someone in HR or another position to facilitate. If you tell someone you do not want to engage, and they do not acknowledge your boundaries, keep documentation of your communication and report their behavior.

If you hold a position of social privilege, get curious about how you may have more power and emotional bandwidth to connect with colleagues, support others, and advocate for Dignity? Those who have social privilege have a responsibility to push conversations, challenge bias, and advocate for universal Dignity in our communities. Asking people to re-think long held beliefs, challenge their own bias, or engage in hard conversations is asking them to be vulnerable, so when you make this request assure them that their Dignity, their worth, is just as important. . Using the Dignity framework helps you understand why confronting yourself and others is hard. Identifying and admitting privilege, bias, and confronting systemic injustice is deeply shameful because it forces those with privilege to confront how whiteness and the systems whiteness creates has stripped others of their humanity. This realization is upsetting and makes people want to either fight or flee to protect their sense of self and moral identity. Dignity does not ask for perfection, but it does demand we understand the responsibility to increase our expectations of ourselves and what we are capable of to create change.

## 2. Given the political climate, how do you as a teacher both validate students' perspective and their dignity without reinforcing racist or sexist perspectives?

Grounding your classroom in the Elements of Dignity gives you a built in framework and shared vocabulary for hard moments and managing multiple points of view. In my classroom, we used the Elements to come up with class norms during the first week of school. I introduced the idea of dignity and the elements during the first few days before we covered any content. We then used the elements to get specific about what each one meant and how that translates into a culture of dignity in our room. We came up with a set of norms for class conduct, my teaching style, and discussions before we did anything academic.

A big part of creating class norms was walking students through activities about forecasting sticking points; meaning perspectives they could imagine causing friction *before* we ever had a class discussion. This was an internal exercise where I asked students to look at the elements and predict how their values and beliefs about certain topics could limit others from feeling safe. I had students fill out an anonymous google form, and then we used their submissions to practice prosocial critical thinking like. This gave us each a great chance to think proactively and create space for each other. We used their submissions and workshopped all of them, using the elements. The anonymous nature of the submissions made students feel safe, and it also gave us an excellent opportunity to practice critical thinking about values and beliefs using dignity. Having anonymous suggestions also gave me the chance to model how to push on a point of view without humiliating the person who holds that idea. It also opened up a lot of important discussion points around. The elements also allowed me to create firm boundaries around emotional safety and norms around when conversations would be ended.

We then discussed the difference between discomfort and a violation of dignity. For example, a white student *feeling* shame about the legacy of systemic racism in our country is not the same as *being* shamed. For example, if another student shared a fact about or experience of racism without singling out or personally attacking them, the white student's dignity is not being violated. Instead, they are upset and uncomfortable. We used the anonymous submissions to also chart out how each suggestion could both violate dignity and cause emotional discomfort. This way, when conversation became heated, I could stop and say, "I need you to get curious about whether this is a dignity violation or discomfort. You don't have to answer me right now. Your feelings are your feelings and you get to have them. I am going to ask you to

sit with them and you and I can follow up after class. If you need to take a break please let me know.” Know that supporting students through these moments is crucial, so make time to follow up and talk with them. Never let emotional discomfort, however mild, go undiscussed.

This is all to say, if you want to create a transformative culture in your classroom, it requires proactive planning. When a student shares an opinion that is divisive, use the elements to either guide the discussion or set a boundary around what will or will not be discussed in your classroom.

### **3. Any tips on applying Dignity to anti-racism instruction?**

We have compiled a tool that gives extensive information on using Dignity to have conversations about race, you can find that document by [clicking this link](#). While anyone can use this document, it is meant to coach white educators who want to learn how to confront bias in themselves and their communities.

I have used Dignity to discuss race and bias in the classroom, with my family, with friends, and in professional settings. It is especially effective when discussing white fragility because it provides a way to offer feedback and challenge ideas without humiliating the person and keeping the discussion rooted in common humanity. If you share the Elements of Dignity and ask people whether they are universally extended to people from marginalized groups, it illustrates pretty quickly how individuals, policies, or stereotypes deny others their dignity.

An effective tactic is to use the elements to analyze and discuss history and current events. When you look at an event, examine how the elements are denied to certain people or how the elements are influencing both sides of a conflict.

The current debate over police violence in America is an effective example. Using Dignity helps students think through the issues with a shared vocabulary and a push towards prosocial critical thinking. You could use one of the elements to root the conversation by structuring an analysis of a current event around a specific element. You could use a specific element for discussion, writing assignment, reading assignment etc. Let’s say you want to talk about the Black Lives Matter movement, you could create the boundary that the analysis is rooted in different perceptions of Safety. So rather than a student saying anyone who doesn’t support Black Lives Matter is a terrible person, they can say, “I support this issue because all humans have

dignity and deserve to feel safe. Imagine what it feels like to feel unsafe when you interact with the police; the people who are supposed to protect you? ? I don't think that is fair." It also helps you contextualize current events. It allows you to explain that long term denial of Dignity creates lasting psychological and physical harm. When individuals or groups of people are systematically denied access to their full humanity they will demand its restoration, This also gives students who do not support Black Lives Matter the chance to share how they may feel protests could make law enforcement feel unsafe and share their point of view without calling the supporters of BLM radical terrorists or something else inflammatory. This does not mean students have to agree or change the way they think. It does however mean that you can have a conversation without it turning into dehumanizing attacks.

It also helps students give feedback to you, administrators, parents, and peers about their identities. Having the language to share how actions, words, behaviors, or rules deny dignity empowers individuals to advocate for themselves and their dignity. Telling someone the word they used denies you safety is a lot different than telling someone they are a jerk.

#### **4. What about dignity and social media?**

It's easy to identify all the negative aspects of social media when it comes to dignity. Trolling, harassment, platforms to spread misinformation and hate are all ways social media can violate someone's dignity. Using the elements of dignity and the central belief that we all matter and are equally vulnerable can change the way you engage with people online. If someone posts something offensive, rather than trying to humiliate them in response, model responding to them with the elements in mind and as a framework for feedback. Unfollow or mute accounts that use antagonism and dehumanization as their tool of engagement. Realize that in person conversations are far more effective than fighting online.

There are also many ways social media has expanded access to dignity. It is much easier to find community if you are in a marginalized group, to organize around and support social causes, and to elevate voices that traditional media excludes.

Social media is not going away, your relationship with it is the only thing that will change. If you want to see more Dignity online, you have to put it out there and elevate other creators who do the same.

## 5. How can politicians be taught about dignity?

This is a great question. While it may not seem like it, you have power as a constituent. Buy copies of *Dignity* and mail it to your elected representatives. Go to local council meetings and speak about Dignity. Get involved with your schools and school boards and ask them to use the idea in their classrooms. Your voice has power, use it.

## 6. How can we address the removal of statues in society? Is there a line to be drawn with racial justice? Or should we allow people to self-advocate for what violates their dignity and safety?

I will start with a reminder that violations of dignity feel like a threat to our survival. For Black Americans and many others, seeing public monuments to those who supported their dehumanization is a massive violation to their collective dignity. Long term denial of Dignity creates lasting psychological and physical harm. When individuals or groups of people are systematically denied access to their full humanity they will demand its restoration, not because they are violent, but because the oppression that denies Dignity is violent. The tearing down of statues is a response to being ignored and unheard. I do not believe there is a line to be drawn when it comes to racial justice. If the government is not comfortable with the removal of statues, they need to create a reconciliation commission similar to actions taken in South Africa after Apartheid to allow Black Americans and people of color a voice in policy and public expression.

You can address the removal of statues by using the Elements of Dignity to facilitate conversations. For example, using the element of Understanding. You could say, “People from marginalized groups have spent tons of resources, time, and emotional labor trying to convince people that what they think and feel is real and matters, yet are routinely ignored or dismissed. They are rarely listened to or invited to share their perspectives. Their lived experiences are not considered valid. How would you react under these circumstances? How would it feel to have to walk by a statue of someone who sold your ancestors into slavery? How else should people advocate for their humanity?” I realize those questions can sound aggressive, but asked with the right tone and intention they can be productive to have a deeper conversation beyond someone saying, “I can’t believe they are doing that.”

## 7. I'm a white woman who supports the Black Lives Matter movement. How can dignity help to explain why the "All lives matter" response is actually not treating everyone with dignity?

If you want to have a productive conversation with someone who feels antagonistically about BLM, you have the responsibility to honor their dignity as well, especially as a white person. We are all born with dignity, but we are not born knowing how to act in ways that honor dignity. If you want to support BLM, the best way you can do that is to have productive conversations with the movements detractors. [This guide is a great resource to help you have productive conversations.](#)

The "All Lives Matter" response is antithetical to the dignity framework because it ignores the emotional safety of Black Americans and assumes their dignity has been acknowledged in policy, media, and other public spheres.

Start with the definition of dignity and the Elements. Share the list and ask if they feel Black people in the U.S. have been extended all of these elements. You can use them to have a discussion about where you think elements of dignity have been denied and how that is the motivation for this movement. The BLM movement is a demand that black people's humanity is acknowledged. People can disagree with the tactics, but replying "All Lives Matter" further supports the denial of dignity to Black Americans because it denies them the following elements of dignity: Acceptance of Identity, Understanding, Inclusion, Safety, Acknowledgement, and Independence.

You can use the linguistic approach by asking where in the phrase Black Lives Matter is it communicating that other lives don't? You can also focus on the word matter, which in this case is a verb. The dictionary defines it as, "be of importance; have significance." You can ask others why they are challenged by the idea that Black people want to feel their lives have value and recognition.

I realize these questions, when asked with an aggressive or flippant tone, can certainly come off as humiliating. That is not the intention. You have the responsibility to monitor your tone, body language, and anger so you can use them to engage deeper thinking, not humiliate the person with whom you are in conflict. If you have a really intense tone and realize that is contributing to derailing the conversation, stop and acknowledge. You can say something like, "I can hear how I am talking to you and I need to shift my tone. I sound like I am trying to dominate you rather than having a conversation. I am sorry about that, let me shift my tone." When you discuss this issue, you also have to listen to their perspective if you want them to feel recognition.