

# REPARATIONS

## ARE DUE

### Conversation Guide

One of the most powerful things you can do to further the cause of reparations is to talk with other people about it, especially those who are not already on board with the notion. These might be conversations with strangers, but it can be even more effective when initiated with people you know. There is no fixed formula for how to engage in these conversations, because every person is different and every conversation will be different. However, here are some suggestions that may help in approaching this difficult conversation.

*Many thanks to our partners at Building Bridges of Asheville, who have been developing a powerful approach to tricky conversations about race for over 30 years. Their materials helped shape this document. If you haven't taken their training series, we highly recommend it. You can sign up at [bbavl.org](http://bbavl.org)*

#### **Suggested Goals and Principles: "Why am I having this conversation?"**

We generally talk with others about reparations with a goal of opening minds, informing, and inspiring others to join the cause. The principles below can help build a foundation for these outcomes.

- **Create connections (instead of arguing).** People who are passionate about racial justice often come into these conversations with a sense of righteousness, which may lead them to seek to overpower the other person with powerful arguments. This doesn't tend to work out well for anyone. Most people are not moved from their positions on the basis of facts alone, but through relationships. Making a connection across lines of difference through your shared values can be transformative. Consider approaching the conversation with the goal of creating deeper understanding and connection, rather than trying to win an argument.
- **Plant seeds and be patient.** Some people with whom you talk may have an on-the-spot epiphany and eagerly join our cause; however, many may need some time to think and feel their own way through the issue. We have found that pushing for an immediate change of heart doesn't work as well as seeking to plant a few seeds and then allowing them time to grow.
- **Follow up.** One conversation might be enough, but it often takes several. Following up when possible with the people you talk to can be a good way to "tend to" the planted seeds and foster the intended connection.

#### **A Process You Could Follow**

1. **Before the Conversation.** A few things we suggest you do before you initiate a conversation.
  - **Get more familiar with the reparations story and movement.** It's a good idea to familiarize yourself with the rationale behind reparations, both in general and as it pertains to Asheville and Buncombe County. This will enable you to answer some questions that may come up over the course of your conversation. Keep in

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mind that you don't need to be an expert with dozens of facts and arguments at your disposal. The key to a good conversation isn't knowing how to answer every question.

- **Read the RJC materials (all available at [rjcavl.org/reparations-are-due/](http://rjcavl.org/reparations-are-due/))**
  - [Reparations are Due Pledge & Explanation](#) - An overview of local history and the harm inflicted on Black residents, from slavery through Jim Crow apartheid and up to the present day.
  - [The Local Reparations Process in Asheville and Buncombe County](#) - A synopsis of the local reparations process, starting with the passage of the Reparations Resolutions in 2020.
  - [A Brief History of Reparations](#) - A broader timeline of the history of reparations in international, national, and local contexts.
  - [Common Questions and Concerns](#) - A list of questions and concerns that people have raised around reparations for Black people, with some suggestions for how to respond to them.
- **Read other powerful articles**
  - A place to start (or review, if you've read it before) is [The Case for Reparations](#) by Ta-Nehisi Coates.
- **Reflect on your own journey.** We highly recommend taking a little time to think and recall the feelings that led you to embrace the cause of reparations for Black people. While we don't recommend leading with your own story when you start talking to someone about these issues, you may find you are more grounded and composed in these conversations if you understand your personal motivations and drives. An opportunity to share these things about yourself in a meaningful way will also likely arise in a good conversation, and it can be helpful to have given it some thought beforehand.
  - **Identify your feelings and values.** Ask yourself: Why do you care about this issue? What feelings come up for you when you think about it? Which of your values are challenged by our current racial justice reality? What values would be affirmed by the delivery of reparations?
  - **Develop your story.** How did you come to believe that reparations are due to Black people? Where did you begin? What beliefs did you have before you came to support this cause? What people or experiences influenced you to shift your thinking and feelings?
  - **Acknowledge your position.** Become familiar with your own position in this conversation and how it may be influenced by personal and political characteristics that may have a negative impact on the message or relationship (like your own feelings of guilt, privilege, saviorism), and work to grow your awareness of, and willingness to challenge, these aspects of your motivation. It may benefit you to feel that you have an interest in this

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issue that is authentically in solidarity with Black folks and less centering of yourself.

**2. Set up the Conversation.** These conversations can bring up a lot of feelings in both participants, and so it's often wise to set an intentional time and place that is conducive to good dialogue. This isn't a necessary step; sometimes there's no time like the present. Even then, it's a good idea to make a clear invitation to the conversation and take a moment to shift yourself into a good frame of mind and state of being.

- **Make the invitation.** Be upfront in what you are proposing and why (e.g. "Hey friend, I've been thinking a lot about our local reparations process, and I was wondering if you'd be up for a conversation about it. I'd be really interested in hearing your take.")
- **Get grounded.** Take some deep breaths. If you have the space to do so, review the Suggested Goals and Principles section at the beginning of this guide.

**3. Have the Conversation**

- **Frame the discussion.** Open the conversation by setting some expectations and boundaries.
  - Express what you feel can be gained from this conversation: Why is this conversation one you want to have with the person? Emphasize the importance of open dialogue and understanding different perspectives.
  - Express your intention to explore the topic of reparations for historical and current harms inflicted upon Black people, acknowledging the complexities and sensitivities involved.
- **Define reparations.** Take the time to define the term itself.
  - Clarify that the term reparations, in this context, refers to measures aimed at redressing the historical and ongoing harm inflicted on Black individuals and communities.
  - Emphasize that reparations are intended to address systemic injustices and are not simply a form of individual compensation.
- **Ask open honest questions.** This is a concept introduced by the educator Parker Palmer. It is a simple practice of asking questions that are not leading or argumentative and are instead designed to open the conversation up. (You can read more about the practice at <https://couragerenewal.org/foundations-participant-portfolio-3/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2022/08/22-08-18-Open-Honest-Questions-.pdf>.) For example, "What are your thoughts about reparations for Black people?" is a great place to start. (In contrast, asking a question like, "Why don't you believe in reparations for Black people?" is likely to put the other person immediately on the defensive and interfere with the connections this conversation could be making.)
- **Listen.** This is one of the keys to constructive dialogue – the art of being a good listener. Pay attention to the person's words as well as their feelings. Ask clarifying questions, ideally open, honest ones. Your goal is to understand what they think and feel. You can reflect back to the person what you think you are

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hearing the person say and what you think they are feeling, to help them to know you are listening.

- **Make connections.** Connecting to what the other person is saying can be a crucial pivot point in a good dialogue, where you look for common ground and creative ways to deepen the conversation. There are several ways to do this.
  - **Connect to what they have shared, as much as you're able.** Here is an approach developed by the folks at Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ): “Affirm whatever tiny part they’re saying that you could possibly affirm. Don’t be dishonest about your values, but find a sliver of connection that you can affirm. Even if people’s fear is totally racist or classist, they’re not going to be able to move past that fear unless we affirm something in the anger, despair or fear they are expressing. Try asking how they FEEL about what they just said, (“Interesting. How do you feel about that?”) and then affirm their feeling even if you can’t affirm their statement.” (Check out their powerful From Scarcity to Solidarity Toolkit at <https://surj.org/from-scarcity-to-solidarity-toolkit/>.)
  - **Make a connection around values.** Once you have a sense of what they’re feeling, you can look for the values that are expressed in their feelings and see if you can connect it to your own values. For example, the person may be feeling fear based on a belief that there aren’t enough resources for everyone and they don’t want themselves or loved ones to lose access to resources. This is something that you might feel as well and can connect to.
- **Share.** Look for ways to share your own thoughts, feelings, and experiences as a way of building a bridge between you and the other person.
  - **Your story.** This is where you might talk about how you came to embrace the cause of reparations for Black people. This can be particularly effective if you can connect your story to the shared values you have identified with your conversation partner.
  - **Offer resources and information.** While we strongly emphasize the importance of making a human / emotional / values connection, sometimes there is an opportunity to connect – and correct – common misconceptions about reparations. If your partner is interested in more information, you can reference the materials above to help steer them toward accurate information about the case for reparations – both locally and beyond. If there is an opening, here are some things you might share:
    - **Historical injustices**
      - Explain the historical context of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and mass incarceration, highlighting their devastating impact on Black individuals and communities.
      - Emphasize the long-lasting consequences that continue to affect Black people today, such as wealth and health

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disparities, educational inequities, and systemic discrimination.

- **Moral and ethical justifications**
  - Present the moral and ethical arguments for reparations, such as the recognition of the inherent dignity and worth of all individuals, the principle of restorative justice, and the acknowledgment of past wrongs.
  - Highlight that reparations can contribute to healing, reconciliation, and a more equitable society for all.
- **Economic and societal benefits**
  - Discuss the potential positive impact of reparations on the economy and society as a whole. Cite studies and evidence that demonstrate how closing the racial wealth gap and investing in marginalized communities can lead to economic growth, reduced inequality, and increased social cohesion. For example, research indicates that a robust reparations program that succeeds in shrinking the racial wealth gap would significantly boost the national economy by as much as 4% of GDP, or between \$1 and \$1.5 trillion. See [The economic impact of closing the racial wealth gap](#), by N. Noel, D. Pinder, S. Steward, and J. Wright.
- **Addressing concerns and objections**
  - Anticipate and address common objections or concerns that people may raise, such as:
    - **Responsibility and accountability:** Acknowledge that reparations involve holding institutions and systems accountable for past and present injustices rather than placing blame on individuals who were not directly involved.
    - **Complexity of implementation:** Recognize that implementing reparations requires careful consideration, planning, and community involvement. Highlight the need for collaborative efforts to find effective and equitable solutions.
    - **Identifying beneficiaries:** Emphasize that reparations should be guided by a commitment to justice and equity, aiming to uplift those who have been historically and disproportionately impacted by systemic racism.
    - **Perceived inequity or "reverse discrimination":** Clarify that reparations aim to address existing inequities, not create new forms of discrimination. Emphasize the goal of

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achieving equal opportunities and dismantling systemic barriers.

- **Closing. If possible, bring the conversation to an intentional close.**
  - **Summarize.** Review the conversation, pulling out any key moments or learnings. Include acknowledgement of the other person's perspective(s).
  - **Thank them.** Offer appreciation for their willingness to engage.
  - **Suggest next steps.** This can take several forms
    - **Invite them to sign the Reparations Are Due Pledge.** If they've reached a place where they seem ready to embrace the movement, direct them to the [Pledge](https://www.rjcavl.org/reparations-are-due/) (<https://www.rjcavl.org/reparations-are-due/>) and invite them to sign.
    - **Invite them to review the RJC materials,** which are conveniently summarized on the [Pledge page](#).
    - **Suggest they read up on reparations.** The [Ta-Nehisi Coates article](#) is an excellent place to start.
    - **Set up a time to have a follow-up conversation.** Invite them to check in at a future time (ideally somewhere between a few days and a few weeks). This is a good step regardless of where the conversation concluded. If they wanted/needed time to reflect on the conversation, it's a good idea to meet up again to continue the dialogue. If they got to the place of endorsing the Pledge, it is still wise to check in later to see what additional thoughts and feelings have come up – and to potentially invite them to initiate some conversations of their own!
- 4. **Follow-Up on the Conversation.** This proceeds naturally from the final stage of the conversation listed above.
  - As soon as possible
    - Be sure to send them the things you promised to send them (i.e. Pledge, RJC materials, article links, etc.)
    - Confirm the date of your follow-up conversation.
  - A few days before your follow-up conversation
    - Remind them of your plan and confirm they're still available.
    - Follow the same steps above to continue your dialogue.