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## What Mentors Can Do in the Wake of #Charlottesville



Posted by [tweiston](#)

Most of us were already aware of the world we were living in before the events in Charlottesville happened. But, if for some reason it wasn't too clear, we received our wake up call when hundreds of "alt-right" neo-nazis and white supremacists/nationalists marched through the campus of the University of Virginia with fire-lit torches, confederate flags, Black lives don't matter t-shirts, some in militia gear and many with helmets and shields. Beyond the aesthetic of a traditional klan rally, the intentional breach of an educational space was all the more egregious. Incidences like these reverberate, especially within communities of color where the differences in the way the media shapes the narrative and the police react and respond are particularly pronounced.

Our young people are taking notice. They are acutely aware of these events and others like them and are having their own discussions and taking their own actions. As we do our mentoring work, we must consider that many of the

young people we serve come from communities targeted by the white supremacists who marched on Friday. Some of them attend schools like the one these white supremacists marched through, they may have even been in the crowd of anti-racist protesters mowed down by one of their cars or they were watching President Trump mince his words when speaking about the incident. The young folks we serve have to navigate spaces where they must face and deal with these people, and much of what they experience isn't the blatant racism and violence we notice when it hits the news, it's the everydayness of dismissal, invisibility, and micro aggressions that challenge their very right to exist. What our marginalized and minoritized youth must contend with must be addressed with our mentoring. The critical mentoring concept stresses the importance of context in the mentoring approach. And our current context includes an apparent and purposeful attack on the progress people of color have made. Here three things mentors can do to support youth in the wake of Charlottesville:

*Do your own work before engaging with young people*

Our young people are already dealing with significant trauma. The last thing they need is for adults who have not confronted their own privilege and ideas to interact with them in ways that do further damage. Ask yourself some fundamental questions about your response to the Charlottesville incident. Ask yourself if those answers are at odds with what the young people you are working with might need at this moment. You may not be able or be positioned to have a healing discussion with your protege. You might instead need to help your protege identify a group with which he or she can process. It is important that we understand that we may not always be the best ones to help and along with that means doing our own work first. Mentoring programs have a responsibility to ensure that the folks working with our young people have the tools and language they need to be effective. We can't afford to have untrained mentors attempting these types of discussions. Finally, if you are a mentor who has not or is not willing to do the work you need to do before engaging marginalized youth in these conversations, then do not engage.

*Provide young people with safe spaces to process*

As mentors, we owe our young people support and guidance. This means establishing safe spaces for youth to process events like Charlottesville. We can't ignore that these things are happening and we can't ignore that youth need opportunities to talk about, understand and gather their own thoughts about these situations. If they don't do it with us, they will still do it. Mentoring

programs should acknowledge the issue and establish safe spaces for youth to come together to process these events with the support of their peers and adult mentors. And, these space must be reimaged. They do not need to look like the typical town halls or open forums that adults require to feel safe and secure, let youth lead the way and allow them to organize the spaces in ways that best suit them.

*Understand your place and privilege and behave accordingly*

There is a lot of talk currently about folks identifying and understanding their privilege. If you are engaged in a mentoring relationship or in a position dealing with young people, this is work you should regularly be doing. However, we know the opposite to be true. So, re-read the very first point that I made in this piece. Do your own work before dealing with our young people. Understand that even if you do not ascribe to or agree with the stance of white nationalists, you may hold ideas that do more to excuse them than to condemn them; silence is violence. Understand that your place in our society in and of itself comes with challenges. Be aware, be sensitive and know when it is time to speak or act and when it is time to let other folks lead. Understand that youth might not be ready to dialogue with you and be ok with that. Do not ask young people to explain, expound or educate you. They need space to process trauma and positioning yourself as needing help or education isn't the role you should be playing for them.

There are plenty of tools available to mentors to help them do the work required to support youth in the wake of Charlottesville. I would suggest grabbing a copy of [Critical Mentoring a Practical Guide](#) as a start.

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