**How to talk to patients about racial injustices and biases**

*from Larry Shelton, Associate Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at UVM*

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*This is an interesting challenge.  I’m not an expert, but here are a few quick thoughts.*

*First, health care providers have to be clear about their roles.  Patient care is first priority, and that requires maintaining rapport.  So arguing with a patient or client is not appropriate.  At the same time, one doesn’t have to agree with the client.  Establishing some common ground may be useful.*

*(takeaway here is to redirect with something like “We are here to talk about your healthcare, etc”)*

*The second priority is to use the relationship to encourage the client to think and sometimes, to suggest alternative perspectives.  So when a client expresses an opinion that one disagrees with, it may be helpful to ask questions about it.  Encourage them to talk about their understanding.  The goal is to learn about their understanding, to make sure you understand how the person thinks.  And in the process of asking questions, you can imply other perspectives.  Again, you don’t have to agree, but you also don’t have to openly disagree.  The point is to create a civil, open conversation that doesn’t derail the care one is providing.*

*Some possible scripts for these conversations would include:*

*What do you think the demonstrators are so angry about?*

*What do your black friends say about it?*

*What would it take to get you so angry you’d be out in the streets?*

*What do you hear on the news?*

*How do you think we could make the situation better for people who’ve been the victims of racism?*

*And then to plant the seeds of alternative perspectives, simple factual statements such as:*

*It can be pretty difficult to be black in this country, even in Vermont.*

*We hear from black parents that they worry a lot about their kids being targeted by the police.*

*We white folks don’t really know what it’s like to be black.*

*Clients may still hold views we disagree with, but they do hear our questions, and our statements, and those may serve to open the person to alternative understanding.*

*It is important that professionals work to understand our own views, and the experiences of people of color in our communities.  That means reading about those experiences and listening to people of color.  It’s common for people who grew up in white communities, as I did in rural Illinois, to have very little experience with people of color.  So we are likely to not understand.  More importantly, we have grown up in a racist society that encourages discrimination in many ways.  We assume we’re not racist, when in fact we have internalized racial stereotypes and bias just by living in our society.  So we have a special obligation to educate ourselves about the real experience of people who have spent their lives being discriminated against.*

*My suggestions for reading include:*

*Ta-Nehisi Coates, Between the World and Me.*

*Emily Bernard, Black is the Body.*

*Jennifer Harvey, Raising White Kids.*