

## **Important Qualities of Authentic Relationships Across Differences**

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Our commitment to the ongoing process of developing an authentic relationship across racial and gender differences has helped us to identify important foundational qualities of our relationship. These characteristics are essential to building trusting and lasting relationships across race and gender within a society that continues to be grounded in racism, sexism and other forms of oppression. It has also been important for us to recognize that, although much of our work in developing an authentic relationship has occurred on the personal and interpersonal levels, our relationship is also deeply impacted by institutional and cultural systems that have influenced our behaviors and defined our privileges – or lack thereof. The following characteristics have been important to us in creating and nurturing an authentic relationship across race and gender:

- **Willingness and *eagerness* to be challenged.** I understand that out of the challenge comes a deeper understanding of my privileges and the continued work that I must do to remain in an authentic relationship.
- **Willingness to *not* be in a place of denial and resistance.** I know that denial and resistance maintain power and pain and serve only to block the growth and understanding of myself and others.
- **Willingness to look first at *myself* when feelings of mad, sad or scared surface.** When these emotions surface, I ask myself first what is going on with *me* rather than becoming defensive, judgmental or critical of others. I focus on what my feelings are telling me about what I need. I communicate my feelings and needs with the goal of staying in right-relationship with others.
- **Willingness to remain humble.** I don't know what I don't know – and I will never know everything.
- **Willingness to recognize and own my places of privilege.** I am clear that authenticity in relationships cannot happen if I do not confront my privileges, own them and work at using them differently – from a place of empowerment rather than guilt or shame.
- **Willingness to avoid "hierarchy of oppression" debates.** I understand that oppression exists in many forms and at many levels. I resist the temptation to try to convince others that “my pain is greater than your pain.” I work toward unveiling the interconnectedness of “isms” (i.e., racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism) in order to create change at the personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural levels.

- **Willingness to hear the anger and rage of target group members without taking it personally.** I know that anger and rage are the understandable by-products of oppression. I do not become defensive or take it personally when people in target groups need to talk about their anger and pain in powerful ways.
- **Willingness to be compassionate with myself and others.** I understand that I am no good to myself or others if my existence is centered in guilt, shame and anger. Compassion for myself – while owning my points of privilege and power – will allow me to be able to provide the same for others.
- **Willingness to be patient with myself and others.** I am keenly aware that multicultural growth and change are slow and sometimes painful processes. I remain committed to my own learning and change process, and resist the urge to give up on myself or others when “the going gets rough.”
- **Willingness to be on the journey of growth, learning and change *for life*.** I understand that authenticity is not a one time conversation or interaction. I put myself in places which provide ongoing and lifetime opportunities for continued growth. I am committed to being “under construction” and de-construction for a lifetime.
- **Willingness to be an active listener even when I am not ready to hear.** I appreciate that active listening assists in my personal understanding, growth and learning. As I listen, I am open to accepting “gifts” from others even though they may not be gift-wrapped in ways that are most familiar or comfortable to me.
- **Willingness to remain in relationship.** I realize that most of us are not practiced or proficient in authentic relationship-building because of the pain of oppression in our lives. This is not a prescriptive process. It is fluid, continually open for redefinition, nurtured, open to tension and designed to create sustainability.
- **Willingness to be honest and trusting.** I understand that I need to work very hard and over time to build trust and honesty in relationships across differences. Oppression and “isms” have not supported the development or presence of either of these relational characteristics.
- **Willingness to be grounded in integrity.** I know that I am only as good as my words and actions. Being an individual of integrity will lead to building and sustaining trust.
- **Willingness to maintain a relationship grounded in safety and healing.** I fully understand that this is not an easy process and that there are times when I need to be aware of my personal and spiritual safety. I am also aware of what I need to heal myself as I unveil realities which redefine my world and which challenge my power and privilege – or lack thereof. A commitment to a healing process assists in my ability to continue to be fully present in authentic relationships.

- **Willingness to understand the power of language.** I know that language is a primary way in which we communicate our thoughts and ideas – and that language has been influenced by racism, sexism and systems of dominance that contain inherent biases, prejudices and power. I am open to understanding and unraveling my use and misuse of language.
- **Willingness to focus on the impact of my words and actions rather than my intentions.** Well-intentioned racists and sexists are simply that – racists and sexists. Focusing on the impact of my actions rather than the intentions, allows me to challenge my points of privilege and work toward more meaningful and authentic relationships across difference.
- **Willingness to hold both joy and pain in relationship.** I am clear that authentic relationship-building across human differences brings me pain at times as we challenge each other and ourselves. I am also energized regularly by the abundant joys that come with a truly authentic relationship across race and gender differences.