



CREATING STRONGER COMMUNITIES: INSIGHTS FROM PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE



8

PSYCHOLOGICAL STRATEGIES FOR CREATING STRONGER COMMUNITIES

- **ACKNOWLEDGE FEELINGS**
- **BE AWARE OF STEREOTYPES**
- **MAKE PEOPLE MATTER**
- **SPEAK UP**
- **ENGAGE WITH RESPECTFUL MAJORITY**
- **DEFINE PROBLEM GROUPS NARROWLY**
- **DEAL WITH CONFLICT POSITIVELY**
- **ADVOCATE FOR CHANGE**

BACKGROUND

Australia generally prides itself on being a safe, peaceful, multicultural society and for decades, people's support for multiculturalism in Australia has been very high. Despite this, people from non-English speaking backgrounds report quite high levels of discrimination, indicating that racism and prejudice are still a large problem in Australia. Recently, too, people's fears of community violence, and even violent extremism and terrorism have risen, despite the relatively low level of threat of these forms of violence in Australia.

How we deal with these fears, at all levels of society, is hugely important. When people are anxious about threats of violent extremism this is usually followed by an increase in calls for surveillance and greater police powers. However, there is little evidence to support the effectiveness of such approaches. Worse, these approaches risk undermining Australia's multicultural ethos and national identity. They also risk violating our civil liberties, invade privacy, discriminate against whole classes of citizens, and paradoxically increase the risk of radicalisation and the threat of violence and terrorism.

In response to these rising levels of fear, this resource offers some strategies which may help to create happy and safe communities. Using insights from psychological science, we show how all of us can play a part in building social cohesion in our communities. Social cohesion is the bond or 'glue' that binds people together in positive relationships. The more that people feel connected and that they belong and matter in our communities, the happier and safer (and even healthier!) we all become.

ACKNOWLEDGE FEELINGS

It is understandable for people to have strong feelings when they think about violent extremism, particularly after a recent event that has received a lot of media attention. It is frightening to imagine random acts of violence or destruction that might hurt ourselves or our families, or our communities or other innocent people.

Yet, whilst these fears are understandable, when we are fearful we often react in unhelpful ways. Often, fear leads to overreaction, and increased calls for law and order solutions that unfortunately create more divisions in our society.

A more useful response to the feelings that can arise in relation to terrorism is to acknowledge and manage these feelings so that we can respond in constructive ways and build resilient communities, rather than fearful communities.

TALK ABOUT YOUR FEARS

Talk about your fears with other people you trust to offer comfort and perspective.

THINK ABOUT WHAT UNDERLIES YOUR FEARS

Think about what underlies your fears, which is often a set of important needs and wants like wishing to be safe, secure and happy. Most likely you share these needs with many others around you. Keep your eye on these important shared values, and look for positive ways of making them happen.

RECOGNISE FEAR FOR WHAT IT IS

Fear is a normal and natural response, which in appropriate and life-threatening circumstances can avert potential harm, like a surge of adrenaline to jump out of the way of an approaching bus. So recognise the fear response, acknowledge that it is not helpful in this situation, and then move on.

ACKNOWLEDGE FEELINGS



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ASSESS THREATS REALISTICALLY

It can help to remind yourself that the threat of violent extremism in Australia is very low. As a population we are much more likely to be harmed through overeating highly processed foods, drinking alcohol, rising inequality, or from ongoing reliance on coal for electricity, than we are from an attack from a terrorist.

QUESTION IF FEAR IS BEING ESCALATED

Sometimes politicians and the media can report issues and events so as to generate more fear. Ask whose interests are being served by reporting in a certain way and you may realise there is less need to be so fearful!

USE PROBLEM-FOCUSED COPING STRATEGIES

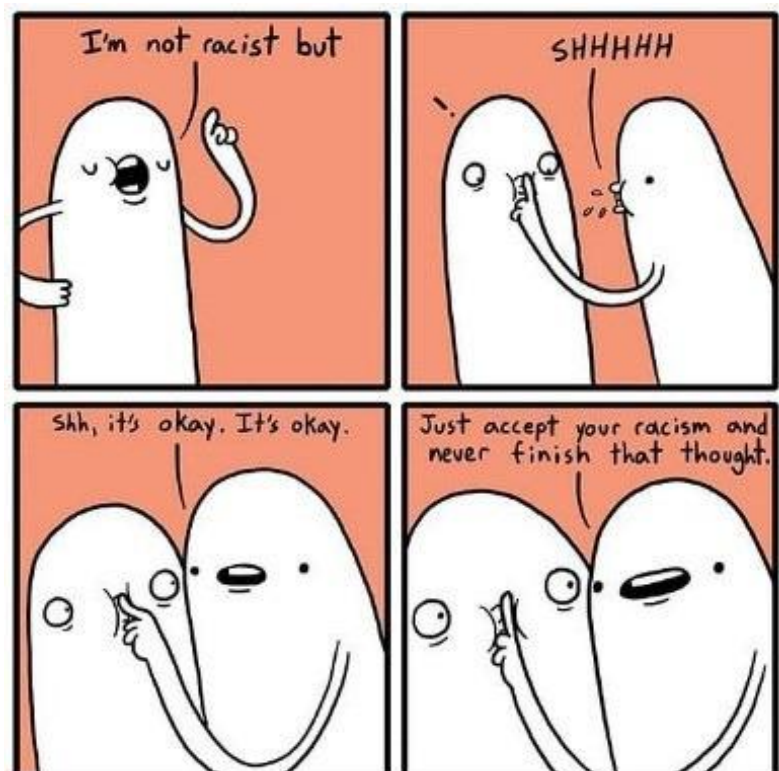
Use problem-focused coping strategies which aim to do something about the problem which is causing the distressing feelings. This could include strategies that help create a more peaceful world like learning conflict resolution, or supporting multicultural events. Or take a break from media stories about violence around the world. Remember that repeatedly reading and hearing stories about violent extremism in the media can raise your fears even if these fears are not justified.

BE AWARE OF STEREOTYPES

Stereotypes are mental pictures we hold about members of particular groups, like about their race or religion. From an early age, we learn to place people and objects into categories to make a complex world simpler. As we grow older and are influenced by parents, peers, and the media, our tendency to label people in different racial groups as superior/good or inferior/bad increases significantly.

When we stereotype people based on race or religion, we don't take into account individual differences that don't fit the stereotype. We ignore the full humanity and uniqueness of all people. Also, the less contact we have with a particular group, the more likely we are to have negative feelings about that group. Then, any negative experiences that we have with a member of a particular group will strengthen our stereotypes and create fears about the whole group.

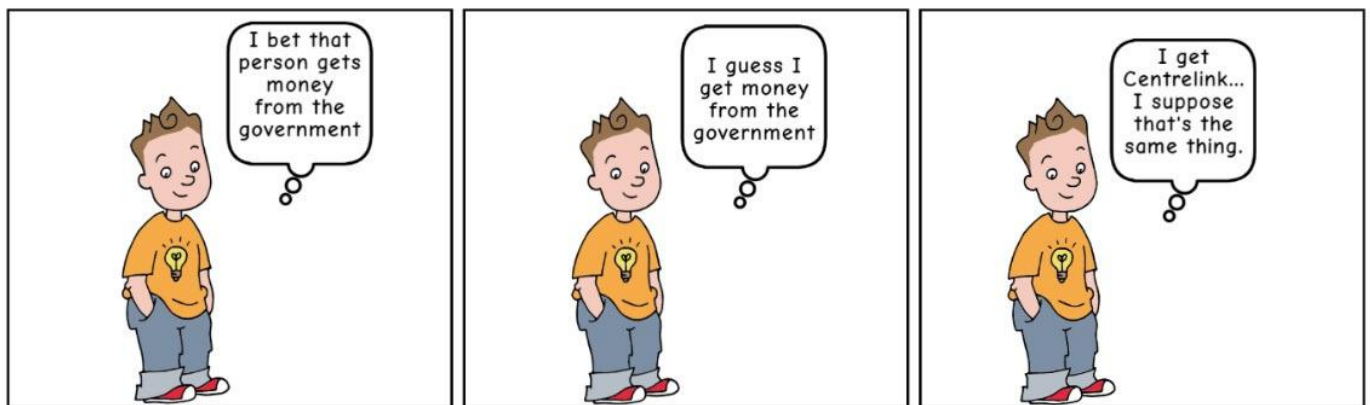
When our perceptions of different races are negatively stereotyped, it's demeaning, devaluing, limiting, and hurtful to others. Because of their harmful effects, we should make a real commitment to try to overcome stereotypes based on race and religion, and challenge our own thinking as well as others' thinking.



BE AWARE OF STEREOTYPES

NOTICE YOUR OWN AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS

Notice your own automatic thoughts arising in your mind when you think about people from different backgrounds. These thoughts are normal and mostly beyond our control, at least initially. However, we are responsible for our subsequent thoughts and actions. Be curious about why these thoughts have arisen and question their logic.



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NOTICE THE WORDS YOU USE

Do they seem 'acceptable' only because the targeted group is not present?

BE OPEN TO FEEDBACK

When someone tells you that you've said or done something that offends or hurts them, try not to be defensive, even if the statement's impact was unintentional. Ask clarifying questions, if need be, e.g., "Please help me understand. How have I offended you?" Thank the person for pointing it out, and ask for continued feedback (but make sure you're not always putting the responsibility on the marginalised person to educate the rest of the community!).

EDUCATE YOURSELF

Educate yourself about other cultures when you meet new people from a different culture (but don't assume you know everything after your google search!).

MAKE PEOPLE MATTER

The feeling that you count and that you are important, that you are acknowledged and recognised, and that what you do makes a difference in the world, is a very human need. Psychologists sometimes describe this as 'mattering'. Mattering is an important part of how human beings make meaning in their lives, and even more, of what makes life worth living.

People also have an inherent desire to belong and be an important part of something greater than themselves. Belonging to a group helps us to feel valued, understood, needed, accepted and safe. People feel better about themselves when they have a sense of belonging, and that they matter.

HELP PEOPLE TO EMBRACE THEIR OWN CULTURAL GROUP

Maintaining culture and identity helps migrants, refugees and other members of cultural or linguistic minority groups fit into new society as immigrants.

Share your own culture with others

Talk to other people about your own upbringing, and your annual rituals and celebrations.

Read books

Read books (and also to children) written by and about people from diverse cultures.

Join and participate in a range of cultural activities

Join and participate in a range of cultural activities that are different from your own.

MAKE PEOPLE MATTER

Make friends from diverse backgrounds

Make friends from diverse backgrounds and encourage children to do so. Talk positively about your friendships with people from different cultural backgrounds.

Provide a dedicated, comfortable space

In workplaces, provide a dedicated, comfortable space like a 'Quiet Room' for individual or communal worship, or simple reflection during the workday. This is meaningful to employees who practice a religion requiring prayer at specific times (e.g. Muslims and Orthodox Jews) as well as to non-religious employees who simply seek time to meditate or reflect.

Bring people in the community together

Bring people in the community together by running community events, activities and programs around food, sport, music and art. Make sure these events are seen as inclusive and affordable (or free), accessible and include childcare.



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MAKE PEOPLE MATTER

HELP PEOPLE TO FEEL THAT THEY BELONG TO THE BROADER COMMUNITY

Help people to feel that they also belong to the broader community by creating a sense of inclusion and belonging for people.

Show warmth and openness

Show warmth and openness to the diverse people you meet as you go about your daily routines, like smiling at strangers (if it feels appropriate!) on public transport, in shops, and on the streets.

Be proactive and welcoming

Consider inviting your work colleagues from another culture to your party. Even though they might not be your closest friends, invite them because you like them and because you think they might enjoy it.

Don't make assumptions

Don't make assumptions about people based on appearance. Asking "Where are you from?" or saying "Gee, your English is good" to people whose physical appearance, accent or name suggest they are 'foreign' can lead to the person feeling different to and set apart from other Australians.

Support marginalised groups to have a voice

Ask for their input and give them opportunities to talk and share their ideas at school or council meetings, sports clubs and community projects. Provide interpreters if needed. Include and encourage someone to be on the board or committee of a local sports team, school, community group or organisation.

SPEAK UP

Speaking up when you see racism and prejudiced behaviour is a very effective way to combat racism. This is sometimes called ‘bystander anti-racism’, or ‘bystander action’. One of the most effective things you can do when confronting someone about racism is to simply disagree. This of course can be taken even further by letting people know that anti-racist views are widely supported in the community. Bystander action also benefits the victim in the immediate situation. They end up feeling supported and included in the larger group of people who don’t tolerate racist behaviour and who value diversity and acceptance.

SPEAK UP OR ACT WHEN YOU HEAR RACIST COMMENTS

Speak up or act when you hear racist comments (if it is safe or productive to do so). Speaking up doesn’t need to be getting embroiled in an argument – a short, warmly delivered, direct contradiction followed by a positive comment is likely to be effective. Getting angry can be misinterpreted as aggression and may provoke hostility. Try to remain warm, but clear that you don’t like what they are saying: “What you said is really offensive and rude”, or “You know, I see this differently”.

DON’T LABEL PEOPLE AS RACISTS

Don’t label people as racists as this can put them on the defensive. It is more useful to separate out the ‘what they are’ conversation from the ‘what they did’ (i.e. their behaviour) conversation. Focus on the person’s words and actions and why what they did and said was unacceptable: “I don’t care about what you are, I care about what you did”.

SPEAK UP

APPEAL TO PEOPLE'S BETTER INSTINCTS

Remember that people are complex. What they say in one moment is not necessarily an indication of everything they think. If you hear someone saying something racist, try saying: "That surprises me to hear you say that, because I've always thought of you as someone who is very open-minded" or "I know you treat all people well, no matter their background, but do you think you might be generalising a little when you say..?"

CAMPAIGN VIA SOCIAL MEDIA

Participate in or begin social media campaigns that offer support for victims of racist attacks and challenge the narrative like the #Illridewithyou campaign.

CHALLENGE RACIST JOKES

Laughing at racist jokes and off-handed comments that are racist can also be seen to be allowing racism to seem normal. Instead, try some of the following:

- Don't laugh. Meet a racist 'joke' with silence, or use displeased body language.
- Try saying things like: "I don't think that is really funny", or "I know you're just having fun, but that can be very unkind to some people".
- Tell the people listening why the 'joke' offends you, that it feels like it's based on stereotypes or ignorance.

SPEAK UP

SUPPORT THE VICTIM OF THE STEREOTYPING OR RACIST COMMENT

Stand or sit alongside them in a supportive gesture, or ask them if they are ok. You could also help them report it to the police or a person in charge, or even support them to make a complaint to the Australian Human Rights Commission, if they wish.



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EXPLAIN THAT BEHAVIOURS CAN BE UNIVERSAL

If someone makes a comment that implies that a whole group has a particular attribute, broaden it to universal human behaviour. Try saying: "I don't think that's an African thing, I think anyone can be lazy, no matter their background".

INDIVIDUALISE BEHAVIOUR

If someone tries to generalise an action by one person to a whole community, challenge the assumption and individualise the behaviour, e.g. "Are you sure that's something all Indians do, or are you just talking about one or two people you know?"

ENGAGE WITH RESPECTFUL MAJORITY

When you show others that you are a part of the larger group of respectful people, to which they also most likely belong, you then have a greater possibility of being able to talk with them in a way that they will be able to hear and accept. This is because, when we pass information to one another we can only do that if we have trust and openness between us. Boundaries between groups can stop these messages getting through.

By showing that you are a part of the group that you are trying to talk to, it is much easier to communicate your message to that group. People are therefore much more likely to take on board a message from someone that they see as 'like them', a part of their 'in-group', than they ever will from someone they perceive as in the 'out-group'.

START WITH SOMETHING POSITIVE

Start with something positive about the group you are talking with. Try saying something like: "People living in Epping, like me, are really interested in supporting their vibrant, multicultural community".

SHOW HOW YOU ARE PART OF THE IN-GROUP BY USING LANGUAGE

Show how you are part of the in-group by using language and values that belong to the in-group.

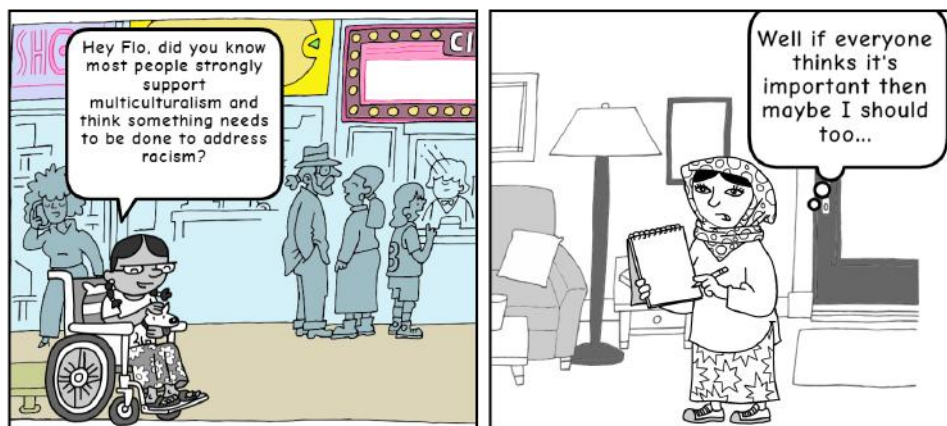
HIGHLIGHT SHARED VALUES

Highlight shared values. Show them that you share many of the same values that they have, and that you are basically 'like them'. Show them that together you are part of a large group of people who share concerns about a safe society and are searching for solutions to the problems that shock and disgust you.

ENGAGE WITH RESPECTFUL MAJORITY

CHANGE THE MESSENGER IF YOU NEED TO

Finding someone who is a trusted member of the group you want to talk with, who can communicate the message you want them to hear, raises the likelihood of your message being heard and accepted and responded to. This is particularly important when talking to groups where there is typically a divide or a gap between them, like for example left wing or right wing supporters.



Another way in which we can help to promote open-minded, accepting and inclusive values in society is to show how this is the majority view. Indeed, more than 75% of Australians have always shown strong community support for multiculturalism and even larger numbers of people agree that something more should be done to minimise or address racism in Australia.

BE CAREFUL NOT TO TALK ABOUT HOW WIDESPREAD RACISM IS

This can backfire on you and inadvertently support people's views and make them believe that they are with the majority in being prejudiced, or that racism is "normal". We know from research that most Australians support multiculturalism and that we live in a harmonious society. This is the story that we need to be sharing.

DEFINE PROBLEM GROUPS NARROWLY

The dangerous influence of individuals and groups that promote hatred and violence can all too easily escalate when the 'problem' group is too widely defined by the community.

There is a tendency for we - the enlightened - to group not only the 'worriers' but also the passive group members into the same category as the 'bigots', resulting in drawing a line between 'us' and the rest of mainstream society. When people say "anyone who disagrees with me is a bigot" or "If you're not for us you're against us", and so on, the group of people who are now perceived as the problem becomes bigger. It also then becomes more difficult to talk to members of that group because you have now created a boundary between yourself and the others, which means trust and openness is reduced.

It is actually more useful socially to define the problem group narrowly. You can then identify yourself as part of the much larger group of respectful people who oppose the problem group, and your communications are then directed towards this majority, to which you belong.

DEFINE THE PROBLEM GROUP NARROWLY

Define the problem group (e.g. bigots, haters, violent activists) very narrowly e.g., describe the group as 'a few young angry men' rather than broadly (e.g. 'all people from _____ background').

DISTINGUISH BETWEEN GROUPS

Distinguish between groups, e.g., terrorists from non-terrorist political opponents.

DISTINGUISH BIGOTS FROM WORRIERS

Distinguish bigots from worriers, political opponents, and passive group members. Acknowledging that the political or social concerns of the latter groups as legitimate, and not tarring them all with the same brush, helps to reduce the problem group's impact and the potential leverage of extremists, e.g. dividing the people who want to ban all Muslims from Australia from the people who are simply scared of Muslims. Doing so will make you more persuasive with the latter group, allowing a different conversation to emerge than if the conversation opens with a rejecting, negative or hostile label.

DEFINE PROBLEM GROUPS NARROWLY

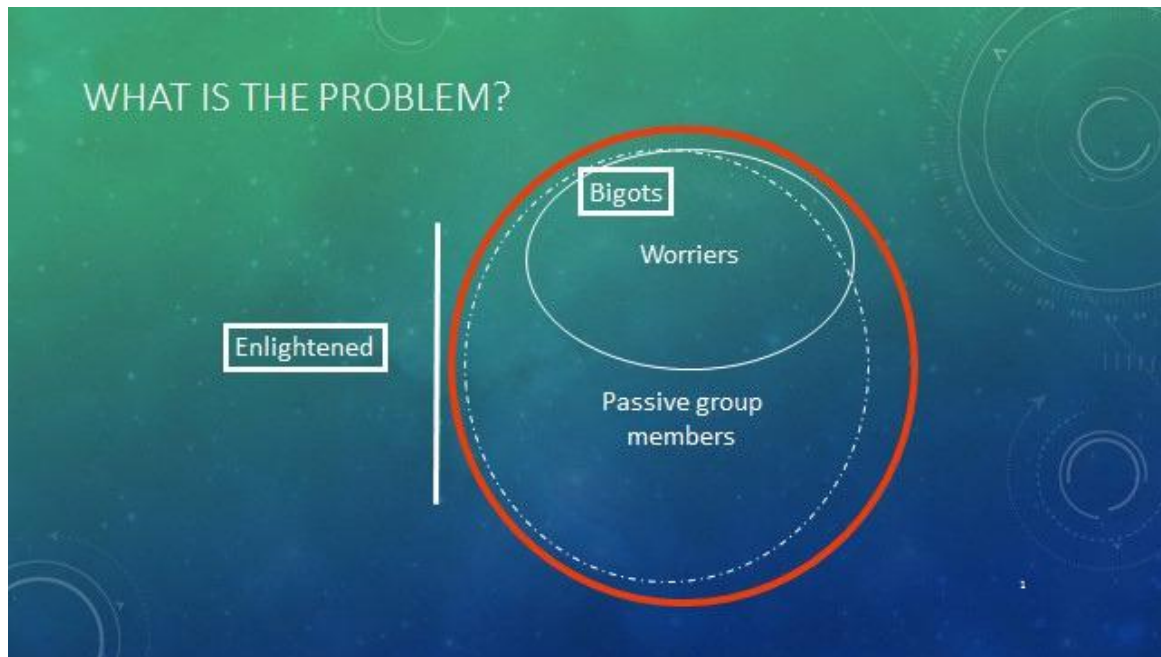


Figure 1. Defining problem groups broadly reduces social cohesion



Figure 2. Defining problem groups narrowly increases social cohesion

DEAL WITH CONFLICT POSITIVELY

Different cultures and people see the world differently. Diversity and radicalism are natural and healthy aspects of any society as they allow complexity and creativity in problem-solving. Diversity has allowed the human species to survive and is vital to our future on the planet. Problems arise, however, when violence is used in response to, or to promote diverse and radical ideas.

Social cohesion is not just about emphasising mutual respect and positivity, but about providing a safe way to express and negotiate conflict. Conflict is not always negative. On the contrary, differences of opinion are essential to a healthy society. However, problems occur when conflict is not managed well or when violence is used.

UNDERSTAND THE OTHER PERSON'S VIEWS

Listen to and understand the other person's point of view. Try to be open and curious about everyone's perspective.

TALK FROM YOUR OWN PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Talk from your own personal experience about how you've come to your views about inclusion and respect for diversity.

RESPECT DIFFERENCES IN OPINION

Communicate that you understand what someone is saying, and that you can see the positive values that motivate them to have these views, even if you do not agree.

DEAL WITH CONFLICT POSITIVELY

RESPOND CALMLY

Respond calmly when you are challenged and people misunderstand you, by reasserting your positive values and beliefs

DISCUSS A COMMON CONCERN

Once talking, try to explore commonalities, differences, ideas and information about a common concern e.g. explain that you love Australia and want to protect what we have but throughout our history people of all races have made contributions to the country.

LEARN AND APPLY CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILLS

When people are taught to resolve conflict by first listening to each other's underlying needs, wants, fears and concerns, they usually find that there are key interests that they hold in common with the other person. These shared concerns and needs then become a valuable point of connection, and help in brainstorming a range of options for resolving the original conflict that can meet everyone's needs.

ADVOCATE FOR CHANGE

Letting the decision-makers, including MPs, governments, corporations and businesses, know about your concerns (like reducing discrimination and racism, or removing laws that invades people's privacy) is crucial. If enough people do this, and keep doing it, in time government policies can be changed.

ATTEND PUBLIC EVENTS

Show up in support and solidarity at public actions, marches, and rallies.

USE SOCIAL MEDIA

Show up in support. Inform and activate your networks: blog, share, tweet, comment, and post prolifically about social issues and actions. Support social media campaigns such as #NotInMyName which are leading the way in helping to promote positive messages. (And conversely, complain to the media when you notice that negative stereotypes are being promoted). and solidarity at public actions, marches, and rallies.

PROMOTE ROLE MODELS

Read, watch and share books, comics, and films that feature heroes who combat racism and spread acceptance. Promote film and book competitions that invite authors and artists to develop works that promote respectfulness and diversity e.g., the Psychologists for Peace children's book award and Youth peace prize.

USE STATUS TO SPREAD THE MESSAGE

People with status and influence (parents, teachers, managers in organisations, politicians, sportspeople, musicians and actors) can use their influence to spread the anti-racism message among those who support and follow them. Do it yourself, or find trusted community leaders.

ADVOCATE FOR CHANGE

PROMOTE WORKPLACE ANTI-RACISM POLICIES

Ask your workplace to promote (or develop if they don't already have one!) their anti-racism policies so that everyone in the organisation is aware of it.

PARTICIPATE IN PUBLIC INQUIRIES

Participate in public inquiries by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) or the Government, to have your say about the human rights impacts of policies and laws.

SUPPORT THE IDEA OF A BILL OF RIGHTS

Support the idea of a Bill of Rights which does not exist yet in Australia, but which many people argue should be a part of our Constitution. A Bill of Rights would state the essential human rights of all people living in Australia, and ensure that these rights are better considered in all subsequent law and policy making.

ADVOCATE FOR THE PRESERVATION OF SECTION 18C

Advocate for the preservation of section 18c of the Racial Discrimination Act to stop the watering down of our anti-discrimination laws. Although this has not been passed by the Senate it is likely to continue as a divisive issue for some time.

USEFUL RESOURCES

Teaching Tolerance Online guide

Responding to Everyday Bigotry: Speak Up! - published by Southern Policy Law Centre. The six steps are: be ready; identify the behaviour; appeal to principles; set limits; find an ally; be vigilant.

<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/speak-up/six-steps-to-speak-up>

Racism. It stops with me campaign

<https://itstopswithme.humanrights.gov.au/>

Be an active bystander against discrimination

<https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/be-healthy/be-healthy-mental-health>

Bystander anti-racism project, Western Sydney

Four bystander anti-racism campaign videos have been produced. These videos educate the public on action they can take as witnesses of racism.

https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/challengingracism/challenging_racism_project/our_research/bystander_anti-racism.

This booklet is adapted from a longer document which includes more information about the rationale for developing this resource, as well as the psychological evidence supporting each strategy. You can find it and more information here:

<https://www.psychology.org.au/About-Us/What-we-do/advocacy/Advocacy-social-issues/Social-cohesion>