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# What White Allies Need to Know Before Putting on Capes

By [Dara](#) in [culture](#), [race](#) on Truly Tafakari: Reflecting the Brilliance of Black Culture Feb 2017



Yesterday, a White Twitter friend asked me to give her my perspective on how White allies can help Black people without tone policing. I was surprised at first. Even though I speak/tweet candidly about racism, I don't much talk about allyship. But she asked in earnest, so I gave her my honest opinions. In doing so, I realized I had much more to say about the idea of White allies. I'm going to share them today.

I should warn ya'll first off that I somewhat swore off personally "educating" White folks on racism or oppression. I quit trying to save All of the White People for my own sanity. That goes for my blog, for my social media accounts, for my daily IRL-life. I publicly write what I think, and if anyone picks up something from those words, then that kills two birds with one tweet. Occasionally, God tells me to stop being a big meanie and talk to people one-on-one. So I did. I don't regret that.

When I think about White allyship, I actually don't approach it from an in-the-trenches-together standpoint. I think about it in terms of friendship. I believe I once said on the blog that having a

White friend whom I don't consider an ally is no longer an option for me. At the same time, however, I am very skeptical of White allyship bound to friendship. Here's why.

## 1. Allyship based on a White person's feelings will fail.

It's more or less common knowledge that doing good for other people often emotionally benefits the do-gooder. Hence, "it is better to give than to receive." Nothing wrong with that. The problem arises when White people engage in allyship largely for their own ego. See: the [Barbie Savior Instagram](#) account. **I think, for a lot of Black people, most White allyship seems contingent upon its ability to make a White ally feel good about him/herself.** And when it stops feeling gratifying for the ally, that person then (often verbally) makes it a point to threaten the removal of their allyship.

I see it all the time on social media. A White ally will feel stung by a Black person online—for whatever reason—and retort something like, "You need people like me on your side." No, sir, we actually don't.

That reaction might be a quirk of human nature—you get burned, you snatch your hand back. But in terms of being a dependable ally to people who have often gone without majority support? Your feelings make White allyship a fickle thing POC can't count on. If allies can threaten abandonment and/or abdication on a dime, then that allyship was always conditional on self-gratification. It was never based on a commitment to justice, or an ethical sense of duty. Just a warm and fuzzy feeling.

Furthermore, when a White person falls back on his or her own racist place of power to get what they want, they were never an ally.

## 2. Allyship that demands the absence of anger will fail.

My Twitter friend asked me about tone policing in particular. I think both White and Black people have to recognize the limits of human nature. Meaning, people deal with oppression in various ways. Some of that is going to result in anger, in bitterness, in downright unfriendliness. Black people need space to work through those feelings. And if space is what they need, White allies must give it to them, or you might get the cannon turned on you. What can you do when you don't understand how a Black person feels about an issue that primarily affects them? Listen, let them know you respect their feelings, and leave it there.

**But you cannot "disagree" with a Black person's feelings about racism.** Let me say that again. Black people's anger, sadness, despair, snarkiness, or indifference about oppression—or your allyship— isn't up for debate. You cannot regulate how Black folks feel just because it makes you uncomfortable to hear an emotion other than gratitude aimed at you. Sometimes allyship will be thankless.

White allies who chastise Black people's anger are asking us to do the same thing we have done for centuries—swallow our tongues to satisfy White folks' appetites.

If you can't be taught, then you can't be an ally. [CLICK TO](#)

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### **3. Allyship that requires friendship will fail.**

I want to tell you a horrible secret of mine. A small part of me hates the portion of the “I Have a Dream” speech where Dr. King conjured images of White girls and boys holding hands with Black girls and boys. Yes, yes, it’s a lovely dream and all that. But as a result, far too many people mistake friendship to be the ultimate sign of the cure for racism.

Riddle me this: Black Americans have always dwelled intimately with White ones (rather than vice versa). We literally washed and aired out your dirty drawers. We knew your unmentionable secrets, sometimes physically carrying them in our innermost parts. And we bore and suckled your children even when we did not birth them. Yet, so-called loving Black individuals as “family” never stopped White people from oppressing their Black kinfolk.

#### **White racism persisted despite White folks’ close proximity to individual Black people.**

Thus, White racism cannot be killed merely through holding hands and “getting to know more Black people.” Don’t brandish your Black friends as woke cred. I don’t believe in the friendship model of eradicating racism.

And so, White allies, I don’t think you should feel conflicted if you don’t like a certain Black person or activist. Their tone rubs you the wrong way? Good. Keep it moving. You literally cannot be friends with everyone. It’s a mistake to believe that allyship has to mean friendship with POC you don’t mesh with. But if your rescission of friendship equates to giving up allyship, then you suck both as a friend and an ally.

If you became an ally because your friend introduced you to the #staywoke hashtag on Twitter, great. But your commitment to social justice has to be deeper than convos over a pumpkin spice latte. The litmus test for your allyship isn’t in the number of Black friends you have; it’s in your willingness to inconvenience yourself for justice when those friends are not around.

### **4. Allyship that cannot take criticism will fail.**

So you wanna be an ally, huh? Congratulations. The first lesson you’ll need to learn is how to bear criticism without defensiveness. We expect most people to bristle when they receive some form of correction. The bristling isn’t totally the issue. What is? Using your allyship as a shield from criticism.

Your best bet is to address the issue and grow past it. Being an ally isn't a permanent state of arrival, and so it can't be used as a rebuttal if you're called out. "After all I've done for you people" is the Trump card of fragile White allies. You also can't use one Black person to justify yourself if multiple Black people cry foul on something you said/did. (See Point#2).

You need to go back to ally school if you believe you're always going to get it right when it comes to racism. **And if you can't be taught, then you can't be an ally.**

## **5. Allyship does not actually come with a cape.**

I know the title of this essay is "What White Allies Need to Know Before Putting on Capes." But I fibbed; there's actually no cape. There's also no sexy spandex undies-worn-on-the-outside that identify you as a White ally. You can try that safety pin shtick at your own risk. Still, know that nothing will ID you as an ally to marginalized people better than your consistent work.

And I gotta tell you, **allyship is really unsexy work.** It probably introduces a lot of feelings: guilt, pride, resentment, fatigue, anger. All that is normal. You're human. But if you're going to call yourself an ally, it might help to realize that other people have had their humanity denied for a very long time. They might be skeptical of you. Don't take it personal. Do that unsexy work because you believe in it. Do it because it's right. Any other reason will dry up after your burnout or your falling out with your BFF.

You're here for the long haul? Awesome. Just make sure to leave any White savior capes at home. Black folks and other marginalized people have been fighting oppression a while. Help is always welcome; self-proclaimed heroes are not. You will not defeat racism in a single bound via clapback on a troll. You may not always get claps on the back for swooping in with the cape no one asked you to put on. Is it nice to hear a thank you? Sure, it is. But sometimes one will never come, and that has to be okay.

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The White people in my life who consider themselves allies didn't get that title from me. I don't think I will ever dub someone "ally." But if I consider a White person my friend, then, on some level, they are an ally. They understand my friendship doesn't come with complimentary capes or cookies for recognizing our shared humanity. I just need my friends to not be racist and to listen when I tell them they might be. Most days, I don't even need saving. All I want is just one less racist in the world.