

Book Club Discussion Guide



How to Be an Antiracist by Ibram X. Kendi, Page 1 (April 2021)

How to Be an Antiracist

By Ibram X. Kendi

About the author:

Ibram X. Kendi is the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Boston University and the founding director of the BU Center for Antiracist Research. He is a contributing writer at The Atlantic and a CBS News correspondent. He is the author of many books including *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, which won the National Book Award for Nonfiction, and three #1 New York Times bestsellers, *How to Be an Antiracist*; *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*, co-authored with Jason Reynolds; and *Antiracist Baby*, illustrated by Ashley Lukashevsky. In 2020, Time magazine named him one of the 100 most influential people in the world.

Source: Publisher website (<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com>)

About this book:

Antiracism is a transformative concept that reorients and reenergizes the conversation about racism—and, even more fundamentally, points us toward liberating new ways of thinking about ourselves and each other. At its core, racism is a powerful system that creates false hierarchies of human value; its warped logic extends beyond race, from the way we regard people of different ethnicities or skin colors to the way we treat people of different sexes, gender identities, and body types. Racism intersects with class and culture and geography and even changes the way we see and value ourselves. In *How to Be an Antiracist*, Kendi takes readers through a widening circle of antiracist ideas—from the most basic concepts

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to visionary possibilities—that will help readers see all forms of racism clearly, understand their poisonous consequences, and work to oppose them in our systems and in ourselves.

Kendi weaves an electrifying combination of ethics, history, law, and science with his own personal story of awakening to antiracism. This is an essential work for anyone who wants to go beyond the awareness of racism to the next step: contributing to the formation of a just and equitable society.

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Discussion Questions:

1. What is the difference between being “not racist” and being “antiracist”? Have you ever previously used the phrase “I’m not racist” before? How can this phrase prevent us from examining our own ideas, thoughts, and actions? What language can you use in place of saying, “I’m not racist”?
2. Why does Ibram X. Kendi assert that there is no such thing as a nonracist or race-neutral policy? Why do we tend to pay more attention to individual acts of racism rather than examining institutional racism and the policies that cause racial inequities?
3. How have American policies contributed to the disproportionate punishment and incarceration of people of color? How have policies shaped perceptions about crime and violence? Were you surprised to learn about the connections between unemployment rates and rates of crime and violence? Why or why not?
4. W. E. B. Du Bois writes about double-consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk* as a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.” How can this dueling consciousness nourish a sense of pride in Black identity? How can this

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dueling consciousness also cultivate shame? How did dueling consciousness impact Kendi's parents and, in turn, influence his own upbringing?

5. Why did Kendi change his middle name from Henry to Xolani? What did you learn about the history of Prince Henry of Portugal? How did Prince Henry's policies lead to a legacy of racism? Who constructed categories of race, and how did this hierarchy grant power to some and take power away from others?
6. When did Kendi first become aware of his racial identity? During a school tour with his parents, why was the teacher surprised when Kendi questioned her about the lack of Black teachers? When did you first become aware of your own racial identity? Did you learn about your racial identity in schools or at home?
7. Many people argue that racism will go away if we stop focusing on race and stop talking about race. After reading this book, how would you respond to this argument? What happens when we ignore or minimize racist acts and behaviors? What happens when we define and focus on racist acts and behaviors?
8. What is biological racism? Why is it important to witness and acknowledge our individual races rather than to ignore them? Why does Kendi call race a mirage?
9. Why does Kendi no longer use the term microaggression, which Derald Wing Sue defined as "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership" (pg. 46)? How does Kendi define these acts? How can changes in the way we name and define behavior lead to larger institutional change?
10. What is ethnic racism? How does ethnic racism divert attention away from policies and towards group behavior? How the jokes that Kendi made about his childhood were peer Kwame examples of ethnic racism?

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11. What is bodily racism? Why do you think Kendi chooses to tell the story of Smurf in the chapter about bodily racism? How did witnessing acts of violence impact Kendi's perceptions of Black people? What messages about the Black body are taught in the United States? How do these messages show up in the media, in policies, and in our perceptions about communities?
12. What is cultural racism? How does cultural racism impact the perception and acceptance of Ebonics and other non-White languages? How does the creation of cultural standards lead to rejection of cultural differences? How can you practice seeing all cultures as equals?
13. Why do people tend to focus on defining individuals as racist rather than focusing on policies that are oppressive? What steps can you take to interrogate and examine racist policies rather than focusing your attention on individual people or groups of people?
14. How did Kendi internalize his individual academic struggles as being connected to his race? How do educational policies create disparities between racial groups? Can you think of a time that you have attributed someone's behavior to their race? How can you practice separating racial identity from behavior?
15. What is colorism? How is colorism, including preferences for particular skin and eye colors, hair textures, and facial features, reflected in today's beauty standards? What steps can we take to build and support a culture that celebrates natural beauty?
16. Did you learn anything from this text about the history of eugenics? How are practices of colorism and biological racism today shaped by the historical practice of eugenics? Why is it important to separate the history and behavior of a racial group from the genes and culture of that same group?

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17. Do people of color have power to eliminate racist policies and racial inequities? Is it possible for people of color to be racist? How is engaging in antiracist work different for White people than it is for people of color?
18. What is class racism? Why does Kendi describe capitalism and racism as conjoined twins? How do racist policies connect and intertwine with capitalist policies? Can you think of an example of a policy that is both racist and capitalist?
19. What is space racism? Why are Black neighborhoods often stigmatized as sites of violence but White neighborhoods are not? How does space racism shape how we think about neighborhoods, communities, churches, and businesses?
20. How is a space racialized? Have you ever entered a racialized space where you were not a member of the dominant racial group? If yes, how did you feel in the space? If not, why do you think you have not had this experience?
21. What is gendered racism? How does racism disproportionately impact women, particularly Black women?
22. What is intersectionality? What does it mean to use an intersectional approach when being antiracist? Why is it important to understand intersections between privileges?
23. How did Kendi react when he learned that his friend Weckea was gay? How are homophobia and racism intertwined? What does it mean to be a queer antiracist?
24. What is the difference between a protest and a demonstration? Can you think of an example of an effective protest in your community? How can protests change or influence policies?
25. What does it mean to be courageous in the face of racism? How is this different from being fearless? While reading the book, did you identify any examples of Kendi acting courageous in the face of racism?

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26. Choose one definition from the text that was less familiar to you. What did you learn about this term? How can you apply this new understanding to your own life? Why is it important to use accurate language to describe our values and goals?
27. How can you commit to following some of the steps to eliminate racial inequity that Kendi outlines on page 231? How can you hold yourself accountable while practicing these steps? Who can support you in this work to actively be an antiracist?
28. Why does Kendi compare the spread of racist ideas to the spread of cancer? What can be done to stop the spread of racist ideas? Do you believe that eliminating racism is possible? Why or why not?
29. Make a list of racial justice advocates, activists, and organizations that can help you deepen your own learning about antiracist positions and policies. Identify organizations in your community that support the creation or changing of policies to eliminate racial disparities that you can join, support, or research. How can you continue to examine your own beliefs from an antiracist framework?
30. Racist policies lead to inequity and disparities in every sector including politics, health care, criminal justice, education, and employment. Choose one of these areas and closely examine your own views, beliefs, and voting patterns. Have you previously justified racial inequality in this sector? Can you do more today to learn about the policies that produce these disparities?
31. Why does Kendi recommend that we approach antiracist work with vulnerability? Why is it difficult to acknowledge our own beliefs or perspectives as being racist? How can recognizing and sharing our own beliefs create an opportunity for self-reflection? How can you help others in their own reflection and learning?

Source: Publisher website (<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/>)