

How to Check In On Your Black Friends and Coworkers

Mental health experts share how to open the conversation.

By Kylie Gilbert



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You've seen the Instagram posts: Check in on your Black friends and coworkers; they may seem like they're OK, but chances are they are not.

On top of a global pandemic that has disproportionately affected Black people, experts agree the public, government-sanctioned violence against Black people can take a serious, if often invisible, mental health toll. "The onslaught of media and videos showing threats, beatings, and murders can be overwhelmingly painful. Because racist violence is not new, some Black people have learned how to cover up their ongoing fears, stress, and mental health problems related to racism," explains trauma psychologist, Jennifer M.

Gómez, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Psychology and the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute for Child & Family Development (MPSI) at Wayne State University.

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That's why checking in on the mental health of those you care about is a particularly important step right now, in addition to public displays of solidarity, making donations, signing petitions, or any of the other crucial anti-racism work you may be engaging in.

Just be sure before reaching out that you aren't motivated by a desire to make yourself feel better or express your own feelings of guilt, shame, or sadness. "Checking in is about the other person, not about you," Dr. Gómez says.

If you do decide to reach out, "Keep things short and don't spill your feelings — shy away from sharing anything that takes the attention off your friend," says psychiatrist Kali D. Cyrus, M.D. M.P.H. "Don't ask your friend where you should donate, tell them where you're donating. I'd avoid asking in general."

You may have seen the now-viral post from activist, academic, and author Rachel Cargle about other phrases to avoid, including 'I can't believe this' or 'This can't be real.' That means checking in should always start with an understanding that this isn't new and shouldn't be shocking — being informed about the racism and trauma your Black friends and coworkers live with is the bare minimum.

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As for what you *should* say, Dr. Gómez recommends:

"I wanted to check in and see how you are doing. I'm sending my support and solidarity. Amidst all this horror, I am here if you want to talk or not talk."

She also suggests:

"With everything going on, I don't want to add to any stress. I just want you to know that I care about you and would like to support you in whatever ways would be helpful. I'm here to talk, cry, watch a funny movie, or leave you alone. If you don't know what you need, that's okay too."

Whatever you say should feel authentic to your existing relationship. Dr. Cyrus suggests sending memes or something funny with a caveat of *"I'm thinking of you, here is a smile"* or *"Thank you for being who you are, love you."*

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Most importantly though, don't expect a response — you can express explicitly that you aren't looking for one, Dr. Cyrus says. "Reaching out is about opening a door of communication. It is up to the other person if, when, and how they'd like to go through that door with you," Dr. Gomez adds.

Understand that despite your desire to hear from your friend, this may not be what they want or need right now. "Remember that a Black person does not owe you an explanation of how they are feeling," Dr. Gómez says. "Not every Black person wants you to be privy to their pain, particularly in the workplace." Furthermore, "it is not up to you to judge how a Black person is responding, or not, to what is happening," she adds.

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At the end of the day though, words only take us so far. "Platitudes of care and concern can become exhausting to hear when not accompanied with action," Dr. Gómez. After all, as Cargle has [bluntly pointed out on her social media channels](#), your Black friends aren't interested in "passive empathy" or "love and light" if you can't back it up with true solidarity.

"Therefore, in addition to checking in, non-Black people can take this opportunity in time to examine how they are and are not promoting racial justice in their workplaces, in their families, in their communities, in this country, and across national borders," Dr. Gómez says. "An important first step is educating themselves and those around them about the enduring legacy, continued presence, and costly impact of White Supremacy in the U.S., including in businesses, organizations, and universities that claim to promote diversity. This education then should lead to action."

Dr. Cyrus agrees that whatever you say to your Black friends should come with a promise of long-term action. "I think we want to know that people are not just checking in because they are overwhelmed with a feeling *right now*, and that their interest will shift next week or when the protest is over," she says. She suggests naming a few specific,

detailed actions you vow to take that are not time-limited to show that you aren't just interested in this issue because it's trendy at this moment.

Bottom line: Reaching out to your Black loved ones is complicated and there's no perfect way to do it, Dr. Cyrus explains. "I have had so many people check-in and I appreciate it to my core — but I always look at it with a critical eye. I think it's always better to express love than not express it, but this reality has to be accepted."

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However you approach reaching out, honesty is key, Dr. Gómez says. "Whatever you offer (support, listening, advocacy, etc.), you need to be willing to do," she says. "Remember: racism divides us. Humble, genuine solidarity can reunite us."