



THERE'S
NOTHING
CASUAL
ABOUT
CASUAL
RACISM...

especially when
it's a part of your
everyday life

These are some of the comments these Aussie women hear on a daily basis, by people who aren't even aware they're being racist ➡

WE LIVE IN A MULTICULTURAL COUNTRY, BUT RACISM STILL REARS ITS HEAD IN EVERYDAY CONVERSATIONS - COSMO'S SHARI NEMENTZIK INVESTIGATES THE EFFECTS OF THESE OFFHAND COMMENTS

"CASUAL FRIDAY THIS WEEK HAS A MIDDLE-EASTERN THEME. Bring some dips, get your burqas out." That's an email I was sent last week at work. It was followed by another, informing me my colleagues have all gone to Ryan's place for drinks, but because I "don't drink" they figured I would "not want to go". I went along anyway and during a conversation about possible cuts, they joked, "It's alright for you, if you get made redundant, you can always work as a taxi driver." And that was just one afternoon. They are having a laugh, but it's at my expense and therefore, it's racist.

Luckily for me, this is not *my* reality, but it is someone else's. For one week, I've put myself in the shoes of another Australian woman, "Aisha". Aisha is a 29-year-old teacher who lives in Brisbane suburb Mount Gravatt, where her parents settled from Oman before she was born. She's actually a character, based on real experiences from multiple Aussie women, on the Everyday Racism app. But this isn't just the latest tech gimmick. This is real life for 4.6 million people in this country, yet no one blinks an eye. Racially insensitive behaviour such as this has been coined "casual racism".

"It can involve things like jokes, offhanded comments or exclusion that is directed at people on racial grounds," explains Race Discrimination Commissioner Dr Tim Soutphommasane.

POLITE RACISM

We all know of the brutal "get out of our country" slurs that make news headlines, but displays of casual racism are more rampant and can be just as damaging. As *The Project's* Waleed Aly puts it, "The racism that really matters in Australia isn't the high-level, weapons-grade derangement that winds its way via YouTube into the news ... This is polite racism of the educated middle class. It's not as shocking as the viral racist tirades we've seen... Nonetheless, theirs is surely a more devastating, enduring racism. There's no event to film, just the daily, invisible operation of a silent, pervasive prejudice. It doesn't get called out," Aly writes.

He's right. The overt racists of the world are condemned for their actions (and rightfully so), whereas casual racism is allowed to simmer along in society, making people feel like second-rate citizens. And chances are you're guilty of it. I am. Have you ever told or laughed at a joke that starts with an Indian, a Chinese man and an Italian man entering a bar? Had a comment slip out, like "I'd never be able to tell you're [insert race here]"? Or perhaps you've asked someone where they're *really* from? Well, all of these are racist and they can be very harmful.

While it's hard to say exactly how rife casual racism is in Australia, we do know that one in five people living here has been a target of verbal racial abuse. In the past year, one in five said they were a target of racial discrimination. That's around 4.6 million people. Three in every four Indigenous Australians regularly experience racism and nearly a full half of all Australian residents from a diverse background have experienced racism at some time in their lives (we're talking the malicious kind, here). With so very many people experiencing such ugly forms of racism, we can assume that there are even more people who hear "casually racist" comments on a daily basis. So, why are we not talking about it?

NO LAUGHING MATTER

More often than not, casual racism rears its head in the form of humour, explains Professor Shane Houston, the University of Sydney's deputy vice-chancellor (Indigenous strategy and services). "There are often jokes that are offered by members of a dominant society, which tend to poke fun at Aboriginal people and in doing so perpetuate negative stereotypes about our employment rates, our ability to live a healthy life, to have a house without tearing up floorboards and fence posts, those sorts of things. There is a larrikin

spirit in Australian communities and we all like to think of ourselves as a fun-loving society, but at the same time how do we reconcile this notion of a fair go with jokes that reinforce negative stereotypes?"

Professor Houston says if one person is offended by a joke, it's racist. "I've been told several times that because I'm Asian, I must be a really bad driver," says Angela, 25. "I learnt how to drive here in Sydney, my birth city and home, and I'm proud of my skills. Jokes and comments made by people, especially my friends, are hurtful, but it's really hard to speak up as I don't want to be a buzzkill. I once got visibly upset at the pub after a friend made a racist joke and she said, 'Ange, take a joke; lighten up.'"

If we continue to laugh at such jokes and brush them off as humour then we're becoming part of the problem that is racism. If we deny that comments such as the above are racist, then we basically say that this is acceptable behaviour, which it's actually not. You may think it's a harmless joke in the name of fun, but the reality is casual racism can have grave effects. As my Everyday Racism app reminds me, people like Aisha, who are constantly the butt of jokes because of their race, are more likely to develop a range of health problems such as depression, anxiety and heart disease.

"Growing up, kids were mean, talking about the colour of my skin, calling me a black milkshake, which I suppose are pretty benign things in the scheme of things," says *SBS World News* co-host Janice Petersen. "But when you're subject to little digs about the colour of your skin on a daily basis, it does chip away at your self-confidence."

Asking someone where they're *actually* from, after they've answered "Australia", can be particularly hurtful. "I'm as Aussie as they come, but because I don't look Caucasian,

some people ask me where I *really* come from," says Markeeta, 27. "It makes me feel like they think I don't belong in my country, where I've grown up."

UNREAL

Casual racism is ingrained in our society. Just look at our mainstream TV channels. They don't accurately reflect the multicultural nation that we are, that we should be proud of. One writer, Osman Faruqi, sums it up perfectly: "There are more actors dressed in cow suits who randomly shower viewers with cash than people of colour on our breakfast television shows."

Almost half of our population was born overseas or has a parent born overseas (and that's before we even consider those whose ancestors arrived by boat a mere 228 years ago – the First Fleet), but you'd never guess that from watching one of our reality shows. *The Bachelor? Survivor?* Both have recently been criticised for their lack of diversity.

"What it says to everybody is that being white is the norm and if you're not white, you're different," says Priscilla Brice, the managing director of All Together Now, Australia's only national charity dedicated to preventing racism.

When Waleed Aly became the first coloured Australian to win a Gold Logie in the award's 57-year history this year, he dedicated it to those with an "unpronounceable name". He told the audience about an actor who confided in him that he had to change his name from Mustafa to Tyler [Tyler De Nawi] to get a job in the industry.

It's not just screen personalities who struggle. Research shows that not having an Anglo-Saxon name makes it harder to get any job. ♦♦



STOP THIS NOW...

Priscilla Brice shares the signs you might have inadvertently done something "casually" racist.

- ▶ **YOU START A SENTENCE WITH "I'M NOT RACIST BUT..."** Prefacing a racist statement with a disclaimer doesn't make it less offensive.
- ▶ **"I'M NOT A RACIST. I HAVE BLACK FRIENDS."** Having friends from an ethnic minority background does not give you permission to make racist comments. What might be acceptable to your friends may be offensive to someone else.
- ▶ **"YOU SPEAK SO WELL FOR AN ASIAN."** While you genuinely think you're giving someone a compliment, what you're also saying is that Asian people (or other ethnicities) have an inferior grasp of English. The fact is, many people of Asian descent are Australians who were born and/or raised here.
- ▶ **"YES BUT WHERE ARE YOU REALLY FROM?"** This innocent question stems out of curiosity, but implies that people who don't have white skin or an Australian accent couldn't have grown up here. Instead, try asking them "What's your cultural heritage or background?"
- ▶ **YOU ARE MORE OFFENDED BY "REVERSE RACISM".** Some people get upset by "reverse racism" and think white people are adversely affected by policies that help minority groups in society. The reality? You're failing to recognise the privilege that white people have in our society. The policies that aim to help minority groups are put in place to ensure everyone gets a fair go, and won't negatively affect you.
- ▶ **YOU'VE TOLD SOMEONE TO "TAKE A JOKE".** With Australia's laidback culture, it's easy to dismiss those offended as uptight people who "can't take a joke". Instead, try to see it from their point of view. Remember: we don't have the right to choose who gets offended by our jokes. Impact is more important than intent.
- ▶ **AVOIDING SOMEBODY BECAUSE OF THEIR RACE, NATIONALITY OR ETHNICITY.** This is the subtlest form of casual racism but it can still be very hurtful. Avoiding somebody can make them feel as if they don't belong.



"It makes me feel like they think I don't belong"





SBS Arabic24's drive presenter, Heba Kassoua, says more often than not, people don't intend to be racist. "I was on a train and on the phone to my mother, speaking in Arabic, and the lady next to me made it very clear that she was annoyed," says Heba. "I just said to her, 'Sorry, am I being very loud?' and she said, 'No, you're not speaking English'. I then explained to her that I speak Arabic to my mother because it's easier for my mother and she asked, 'What is Arabic?' So I told her and her face changed completely. She was interested to know more."

And if you're lucky enough not to be on the receiving end? "I think too often we excuse people or we don't object or pull people up," says Professor Houston. "But we have to say, 'Hang on a minute, can I just share something with you or can I talk to you about this?' I'm not underestimating how hard that can be sometimes. It can take a lot of courage and a lot of confidence to be able to voice an opinion."

Now, we're not saying to throw yourself into a potentially violent situation. In those cases, report it to the police (000) immediately. But your voice can make a difference. "For example, if you're at a BBQ and someone tells a racist joke, you don't really want to be the one to go, 'Well that's racist', and spoil the whole atmosphere of the party," says Brice. "But there are ways you can get around that by challenging them in a friendly way. You can say you don't think it was a funny joke or, 'Oh, didn't realise you thought

WHAT IF I CALL MYSELF A WOG?

Until 1973, Australia had a white-only immigration policy, so the word "wog" was used to describe any ethnic European immigrants, and not in a nice way. Since then, the community has reclaimed the word. So if you say it, and you are one, are you racist? "When people know each other well and are comfortable in the words they use, like 'wog', it's not racism," says Brice.

But Professor Houston questions whether keeping the term alive, even in a reclaimed sense, is a good idea. "Keeping it in the lexicon means it's still available to use pejoratively, to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes. Perhaps it's time to just let it go?"

like that'. That can be enough to let them know you don't agree."

You may feel like you're just one voice, but imagine if everyone spoke up. "If you challenge your friend and they realise they shouldn't be saying the stuff they are, that's one less person saying something racist," says Brice. "By speaking up, you tell the victim they're not alone, they're part of our community."

Perhaps the best response to casual racism is one I read not long ago by Roshni Dennis, an Aussie woman whose parents migrated from India, after she was told on Facebook by a troll that just because she was born here, it doesn't make her an Australian. Roshni's reply?

"How about you show everyone how Australian you are by getting to know a person's story, starting with me," she wrote, before telling of how her parents would work "two to three jobs" to do their part "to make this country great".

"In my Australia stories like my Australian parents' are actually not uncommon and despite our beautiful differences in names, beliefs, looks, diet, languages and culture we have no fear or judgement in our hearts. I still forgive you. And I'll welcome you with open arms to my Australia [sic]," she wrote.

Now, isn't that the Australia we all want to be part of?

For more information on the *Everyday Racism* app, head to alltogethernow.org.au/everyday-racism. ■

The Australian National University did a study where they sent 4000 CVs, with identical qualifications, to prospective employers. The only thing that changed were the names on them. The results? If you're an Italian applicant, you have to put in 12 per cent more job applications than an Anglo-Saxon applicant to be offered an interview. Indigenous applicants need to put in 35 per cent more, a Middle Eastern applicant 64 per cent more and a Chinese applicant 68 per cent more. "I think it's compelling evidence that bias and discrimination still exists," says Dr Soutphommasane.

SPEAK UP

So, what can we do to put an end to this? The answer from all the experts is: Speak up. "People can always speak out against racism, whether they're experiencing it themselves or witnessing it," says Dr Soutphommasane.

Are you experiencing racism?

REPORT IT

Call the police on 000 if you feel threatened or unsafe at any time.

SAY SOMETHING

It doesn't have to be aggressive; sometimes a simple, "What you just said really offended me", or, "Please have some respect for yourself and for others", is enough.

ONLINE

Most social media sites have policies for dealing with offensive material. Facebook allows you to report content that breaches its terms of use.

TALK TO SOMEONE

You can call the free ethics helpline on 1800 672 303 or make a booking online at ethics.org.au/ethi-call.

MAKE A COMPLAINT

The Australian Human Rights Commission can investigate where people have been treated unfairly because of their race. Humanrights.gov.au/complaints-information.