

6 Tips for Interracial Couples Who Get Stares and Weird Comments



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“I wonder if you’ve addressed the interracial-couple dilemma: the questions, side glances, comments (‘You’re *such* a cute couple’), etc. I’m a black woman and have been with my boyfriend for five years. While I’ve inoculated myself against the stares and comments, I still struggle with the knowledge that our skin is all some people see. This has influenced where we eat and choose to live.

“Of course we didn’t enter into a relationship to make a statement, but that’s all we invite. Since the ‘problem group’ are strangers, how do we address this?” —*Mixed Feelings*

It may be 2014. *Scandal* and its interracial dating (or affair-having, but whatever) protagonists may dominate Thursday-night television, **Lupita may possibly have something going on with Jared Leto** and New York City’s first family may be on **“Team Swirl,”** but alas, none of that means people aren’t going to look at you and your boyfriend. A lot. And say weird stuff. A lot.

“As much as we hear that interracial couples have become more common and are acceptable, people like to pretend that they don’t get stared at and get extra attention, but they do,” says **Erica Chito Childs**, associate professor of sociology at Hunter College and author of ***Navigating Interracial Borders:***

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“The first question to ask is, ‘Why are we going there, and what function does it serve in our life?’ If it’s just for entertainment, and you find you’re being stared at, maybe you want to find a different place. But if it’s a place of worship or something that’s significant in your life, especially if it’s job-related, you don’t want to give up opportunities and experience because of other people’s ignorance,” she advises.

Clay, a white man married to a black woman in Houston, told me that country music concerts turned out not to be worth the burden of attention that felt negative. He and his wife didn’t waste any time making a decision: “We don’t really like the music anyway; we don’t need to do that again.” My impression is that people who can’t process your relationship and move on within a few seconds probably aren’t your kind of people anyway and are doing you a favor by making you feel uncomfortable. Forget them.

3. Do your own analysis of your relationship.

I tend to think that the better and more secure you feel about anything in life, the less fixated you are about how others perceive it. You said you don’t want to make a statement, but have you spent any time affirming to yourselves and each other that this relationship is worth it, that it says something about your values and that it fits in with the world you want to live in?

Childs points out that the assumption that people in interracial relationships have heightened awareness or are more introspective about race is often not true. If that’s the case for you, she suggests giving these issues some dedicated thought. You could ask yourself questions such as “Why exactly do these people’s views bother me?” and “Is this somehow making me feel my own identity issues or affecting my feeling of connectedness to my own community?” and talk about them with your boyfriend. Once these issues are resolved and you feel solid about your own answers, you might have less anxiety about what’s going on in other people’s heads.

4. Be open to the possibility that the attention could be positive.

Clay told me the story of a department store employee who was obsessing over Clay’s family and its racial makeup. “He was a white guy who was 19, and he would not let it go!” Clay said. Instead of shunning the curious stranger, they talked to him, and “it turned out that he had just started dating a black woman and was excited to see [our relationship] was working. It was goofy, awkward, immature, but it came from a genuine place.” You never know. People who you think are only seeing your skin might actually be seeing themselves.

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5. Say something.

You can't say for certain why these people are looking at you, but you can commit both to being polite and to standing up for yourself. Depending on your mood, that might mean ignoring nosy strangers, but it might mean engaging, says Childs. If the looks get intense, you could ask, “May I help you?” or simply say, “Hi, how are you doing?”

“Sometimes they don't even recognize they're doing it,” she says, and “the person will quickly become embarrassed and walk away.” When it comes to those overly complimentary comments, “You're such a beautiful couple” could get a “Thank you!” followed by a “It's funny, we do get a lot of extra attention because of our respective races.”

And if you're really made to feel uncomfortable in a certain place, by all means, speak to a manager or write a note after you leave to let the establishment know what happened—especially if its employees contributed to your negative experience.

6. Have some fun.

Refusing to give people the information they're looking for is always a fun game.

“[I'm] at Home Depot, and there's one lady who I know wants to ask if my daughter's mom is black,” Clay told me. “She's always like, ‘She looks just like you. I don't know what her mother looks like, but she looks just like you.’” Clay gets a kick out of just saying, “Thanks!” and keeping her guessing.

There's something to be said for switching the attention from “Oh, my God, I'm being scrutinized and victimized” to “Watch this lady trip all over herself to try to figure out what's happening with our family.”

Do imitations of strangers who are fascinated by your relationship. Stare at people as hard as they're staring at you. Tell stories of your awkward interactions on Facebook, to the delight of supportive friends (and, hopefully, some who can relate). These are all great reminders that the question of whether the “interracial-couple dilemma” belongs to interracial couples or to people who can't keep their eyes off them is all a matter of perspective.

The Root's senior staff writer, *Jenée Desmond-Harris*, covers the intersection of race with news, politics and culture. She wants to talk about the complicated ways in which ethnicity, color and identity arise in your personal life—and provide perspective on the ethics and etiquette surrounding race in a changing America. Follow her on [Twitter](#).

Need race-related advice? Send your questions to racemanners@theroot.com.