In the past 48 hours, we have witnessed the President of the United States make statements that led many to believe that he equates neo-Nazi and White supremacist groups with left wing protest groups as equals. We have also witnessed the President seemingly defend neo-Nazi and White supremacist groups – and even suggest that
“very fine people” participated in the “Unite the Right” rally at which racist and anti-Semitic slogans were widely chanted.

These statements have drawn widespread condemnation from both sides of the political spectrum. Yesterday, on Fox News’ Fox & Friends television show, Republican commentator Gianno Caldwell even notes that the President seemingly refuses to place blame on the White supremacists that initiated the rally. You can read a copy of the transcript of the press conference at which all this occurred here. To say that the President’s demeanor and words at that press conference are a disturbing development in our nation’s history would be an understatement. While expressions of racism and the reign of White supremacy writ large are nothing new in the United States, the events of the past week have indeed rocked our nation and our profession.

As social workers, our voices and actions in these times will speak volumes about how true we are to implementing the National Association of Social Workers’ Code of Ethics that guides our profession. When we become a social worker, we make a commitment to “promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients” in all situations. So, how, exactly, do social workers begin to do this work in these times? Here are five ways you can start to do this work.

First, we need to educate ourselves about the history of neo-Nazi and White supremacist actions in the United States. Knowledge is power. Moving beyond the idea that rallies such as last Saturdays’ are one-offs, or that there is nothing to be done with a world spiraling out of control is also vital for social workers. Start by learning about the prevalence of neo-Nazi and White supremacist groups in your very own state, a map of which can be found at the Southern Poverty Law Center. Social work faculty should check in with their colleagues and their students on how we can further educate ourselves.

Second, have a frank talk with yourself about how you may have benefitted from White supremacy (in the larger sense). “Owning” our own White privilege contributes to the social justice effort. Once we see how privilege works, we can see the other side of the coin that goes along with it, namely, oppression. To learn more about White privilege, consider this checklist and how the content relates to you.

While it may feel uncomfortable to realize just how much White people benefit from a larger system of White supremacy (even without being actively racist), this is a vital step in helping our society to shift. Doing this personal work will assist you in learning to center the voices of people who are oppressed in the journey to foster social justice. As author Roxane Gay points out in her book Bad Feminist, “when people wield the word ‘privilege,’ it tends to fall on deaf ears because we hear that word so damn much it has become white noise.” Don’t let the idea of addressing White privilege become white noise!

Third, take stock of your own thoughts about the events in Charlottesville and the President’s statements. Think about how you can advocate for social justice in response
to all that has occurred. Standing up to oppression means stepping up in a time like this to speak out against hate and oppression.

While it can often be a losing battle to debate members of neo-Nazi and White supremacist groups directly, there are other ways to speak out. Let your community know where you stand – be that your family community, your work community, your geographic community or your social media community. Denounce oppression, but remember, you can also take a strengths-based approach and speak to what you think can contribute to peace and unity in our country.

Fourth, check in with your clients, especially, for example, your clients of color and/or those who are Jewish, in order to see how they have been impacted by the Charlottesville aftermath. As part of our professional social work education, we are taught that in order to truly understand our clients' behavior, we have to think about their human behavior in the social environment. Given this, your acknowledgment of what is going on in your clients’ social environment can function as an engagement tool that can support your ultimate goals for intervention. Then, consider the ways in which you can partner with your clients to address social justice concerns germane to the case.

Fifth, if you’ve followed the first four steps, you are doing great. However, it’s also important to remember that we don’t want to become a fix-it-all person or a guilt-ridden person with a savior complex. In owning who we are and what has impacted us, and in standing up for social justice, we must also avoid what Dr. Robin DiAngelo refers to as “White fragility.”

This phenomenon can be defined as a condition when even low levels of racial stress become intolerable, thus setting in motion defensive actions. The idea is that as White people, we exist in an environment that is insulated from race-based stress as a result of White privilege. In some situations, when White people are challenged by the realities of White supremacy, we may become sad, guilty, hostile, defensive or even fearful. We need to be aware of such reactions and must learn to manage them so that they don’t hinder our social justice efforts.

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Social workers, you are primed to act in times like these! In fact, I argue that you are compelled to act, per the Code of Ethics. Remember, as Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel famously noted, “we must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim.”

The author would like to extend her sincere thanks to one of her accountability partners and colleagues, Dr. Shannon Butler Mokoro of Salem State University’s School of Social Work, for her consultation on this essay.
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