



## On the Path: Six Barriers

If we successfully get past the three “guardians of the threshold” (the indictment, fear of loss/unknown, and the specter of incompetence), there is a common set of six other barriers to action that we encounter on the path. Just like the three guardians, these barriers are normal and natural and need to be addressed directly in order to get past them.

1. Competing Priorities
2. Dealing with Frustration, Ineffectiveness or Failure
3. A Challenge to Our Identity
4. A Challenge to Our Relationships
5. Being Too Visible
6. The Effort Required - Wearing Out

We will all face barriers to taking significant action to counter racism, but not necessarily the same ones. Fortunately, there are some basic strategies that can be used for each barrier.

## How to Get Past the Six Natural Barriers

The key is to (a) acknowledge that the barriers are a natural part of the challenge; and (b) face them directly to get past them.

### 1. Competing Priorities

Life is demanding and everyone has different priorities at different times in a life. We face “big” complex issues, such as climate change, terrorism, immigration, the polarization of society, homelessness, food security, politics and elections. We also face normal personal issues such as does my family have housing, food, healthcare, educational opportunities, physical safety? Is my job and career safe?

Life is not simple, and we all have to make choices about what we prioritize and where we invest our time and attention. Part of the investment choice is considering the return we might get on the investment. What can we actually make happen? What might we get back?

**Passing the Barrier.** Accept that you can’t put 100% into every priority. List the priorities that are most important (the “real” priorities) and accept that you will not

be investing heavily in the others. Identify the time and effort that you can invest in your top priorities.

Assuming that one priority is countering racism, determine which actions fit the investment you can make. Then act and make adjustments as you go.

## **2. Dealing with Frustration, Ineffectiveness, or Failure**

There is no way for us to take significant action to counter racism without some missteps, setbacks, disappointments, and failures. Because of the amount of unknown on this journey, we will be “learning the way” and that doesn’t happen without a bunch of tough lessons. Because we care, setbacks will hurt, but they are part of the journey, particularly this journey.

Racism has been built into the fabric of America for 450 years, so the path out of it isn’t going to be straight, known, or without problems. Most of us are not comfortable with that – but we need to get more comfortable – quickly.

**Passing this Barrier.** Understanding that these tough experiences are normal and natural and part of the path to success can help. Talking with others helps as does focusing on what can be learned from each setback or disappointment. It also helps to reflect on the envisioned desired state and any productive steps along the way.

It is in confronting setbacks and disappointments that we develop perseverance and resilience, which are key to life in general.

*“Do not judge me by my successes. Judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again.”*

Nelson Mandela

## **3. A Challenge to Our Identity**

There are two aspects to this barrier. First, some actions, like contributing financially, might not lead us to see ourselves differently. However, other actions, like being an advocate or challenging people or organizations, can feel “not like me.” At least in the beginning.

Second, as we engage and act, we can come to see ourselves differently and some of that awareness can be unsettling. We may not like everything about “us” that we discover. In most cases, there won’t be a lot that we discover, but what we discover may be significant – and the fear of what we might discover will usually be bigger than reality.

**Passing this Barrier.** In the first instance, this is mostly a matter of taking a fresh look at ourselves and getting used to “the new me” – although the “new me” probably won’t be a lot different. Like the % of new competencies required, the new aspects of identity will probably be much smaller than anticipated. We just keep going and get used to new aspects of how we see ourselves.

The second case is a bit different. “Awareness” takes courage because we can sometimes discover aspects of ourselves that we don’t particularly like (things we do or don’t do – know or don’t know). So having the courage to go ahead and act in spite of the natural concern is at the heart of getting past this barrier. Accepting the gaps without giving them too much energy is also important.

The energy needs to go into continuing to grow and develop, not feeling bad about what’s missing or “wrong.” We need to avoid feeling diminished and focus on our courage and commitment to making a difference. One way to do that is to ask, “If I continue down this path and look at myself in a year, what will I see?”

*“Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one’s courage.”*

Anais Nin

#### **4. A Challenge to Our Relationships**

This is often one of the most powerful and common barriers. If we step out and are visible countering racism, we naturally risk losing some relationships with people who do not accept - or are uncomfortable with our actions. Sometimes the relationship just changes. But we can also be rejected or simply shunned by some of our peer group – actively or passively.

Other relationships may be deepened, but there is a definite likelihood that some relationships will be negatively affected.

**Passing this Barrier.** In getting past most of these barriers there is, unfortunately, some degree of an inescapable requirement to simply, “just suck it up and get on with it.” For this barrier, that approach is particularly important. For most of us, if we visibly counter racism, some of our relationships will be affected.

*“When people walk away from you, let them go. Your destiny is never tied to anyone who leaves you and it doesn’t mean they are bad people. It just means that their part in your story is over.”*

Unknown

In some, perhaps many, cases we can prevent or mitigate the negative impact. We might do that by addressing the issue directly with the person who is moving away or likely to sever the relationship. This can be surprisingly effective as it opens the possibility of changing the relationship vs. simply losing it.

We can also make new connections, which does not prevent the possible losses, but adds new richness.

*“You can’t stay in your corner of the Forest waiting for others to come to you. You have to go to them sometimes.”*

A. Milne, Winnie the Pooh

## 5. Being Too Visible

This can be a surprising barrier. There are actions that we can take to counter racism that do not require being particularly visible, but many will require being visible – essentially saying, “This is me.” Some people like standing out and some don’t. For those of us who don’t like being very visible to others, this can be a tough challenge, but not insurmountable.

**Passing this Barrier.** One strategy for dealing with this barrier is simply finding ways to make a difference that don’t require being too visible. You might find ways to make a significant impact, but you might not. If you don’t, then the strategy is simply to acknowledge the challenge, confront it directly, and get support from others – some of whom might be facing the same barrier. This is another barrier that usually diminishes with experience.

## 6. The Effort Required - Wearing Out

Most of us feel like we are fully committed to our lives now. The demands to build and maintain a family, career, social network, health, and just day to day living takes a lot of attention and energy. Countering racism in significant ways will add to those demands – and the path is an extended one. Finding and maintaining the life energy required can be a barrier.

**Passing this Barrier.** This is another case where going right at the barrier is effective. We may find that we have more capacity for investing time and energy than we think. We may be able to organize our lives to free up capacity. And we might be willing to let some things go in order to commit to countering racism (sacrifice is giving up something for something of greater value).

Simply maintaining or renewing energy on the path is also critical because energy will naturally be expended. This will probably vary quite a bit from person to person. It can include drawing energy from the vision being pursued, being connected to others, daily activities that generate energy (eating well, exercise, meditation, hobbies, etc.), places of renewal, celebrating progress and interim goals, etc. There are a surprising number of energy sources if we pay attention.

“**Act as if what  
you do makes  
a difference.  
It does.**”

**William James**