

# EMPATHY DURING COVID

Addressing Anti-Asian Racism through Restorative Dialogue

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## REFLECTION IN DIFFICULT TIMES

**During the COVID-19 pandemic**, anti-Chinese and anti-Asian racism have been on the rise. In school environments, this type of racism can take many forms, including physical assaults, bullying, harassment, ignorant commentary, and hurtful “jokes.” The spread of these attitudes and behaviors can be immediately harmful to the Asian American students in school environments, and can enable racism outside of the school environment. This facilitator’s guide is designed for educators to engage their students on the topic, foster empathy, encourage allyship, and create a more welcoming space for all students.

# WHAT IS RESTORATIVE JUSTICE?

**This activity uses the framework of a restorative justice (RJ) dialogue circle.** RJ is a philosophy and a practice that centers relationship-building, repairing harm, non-hierarchical communication, and community ritual. RJ has many origins, including Ojibwe community members in Hollow Water, Manitoba; Māori practitioners in New Zealand; and white Mennonites in Ontario. RJ is used in a range of contexts, including the criminal legal system, schools, and community organizations, and can vary greatly depending on the setting.

**Why an RJ dialogue circle?** In contrast to more traditional, punitive methods of correcting student behavior, we chose an RJ framework to focus on shared power, values-based engagement, and anti-racist relationship-building. This circle incorporates key elements of RJ, including a circle keeper, a centerpiece, a talking piece, and the establishment of values and agreements.

**If you are unfamiliar with the circle format,** we recommend reviewing the Restorative Justice Circles section in the Resource List on Page 11.

This circle was designed to be used proactively, or after instructors have noticed trends of anti-Asian racism. For specific incidents of harm between students, refer to the Restorative Discipline in Schools section in the Resource List.

## PREPARATION

**We strongly recommend working with 1-3 co-facilitators in order to create smaller circles within the class.** A circle of 5-10 participants can create an optimal balance between sharing and listening. If smaller circles are not possible, consider adjusting prompts or turn-taking protocol to account for time and attention span.

The Circle Script begins on Page 5 and will use two resources, a BBC article excerpt and a NY Times Op-Doc video, to frame the discussion. All student materials, including the article excerpt, reflection worksheets, and a word bank, are in the Appendix starting on Page 12.

**Thank you for your crucial work with students, and your commitment to creating empowering, justice-oriented classrooms.**

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# THREE CONSIDERATIONS FOR AN EQUITABLE CIRCLE

# 1

## **A Structural and Historical View:**

It is critical that students understand racism as a structural issue, and not solely interpersonal. The circle may be more productive with students who have working definitions of white supremacy, racism, and xenophobia. Consider using lessons from Immigrant History Initiative’s [500 Years of Migration curriculum](#) on Chinese-American history to provide a more comprehensive framework on anti-Asian racism, and see the Resource List on Page 11 for other curricular resources on white supremacy.

# 2

## **Racial Dynamics:**

In Katherine Oung’s video (linked in the Circle Script on Page 5), two clips are used where Black individuals target Asian individuals with xenophobic attacks. Although the video also focuses on structural sources of harm (news pundits, governments), these two clips run the risk of inaccurately blaming Black communities for the existence of anti-Asian racism. The clips may also contribute to racist stereotypes students already hold about Black people and violence. If students make comments along those lines, here are possible circlekeeper responses:

- **Creating an additional round (after the first one is complete):** “I noticed some comments about violence from one non-white group against another. This is sometimes called “lateral violence,” when people from marginalized groups cause harm to other marginalized people. For this next round, I would like you to respond to this question: “If we only discuss lateral violence, and not other kinds (like structural violence, institutional violence, or violence caused by a group in power), what might we be missing? What is at risk by focusing on lateral violence exclusively?”
- **Commenting during facilitator turn:** “Even though groups can hold biases against each other, I try to remember where racism comes from and who it benefits. For example, white people in power have created harsh immigration laws throughout history, and have portrayed non-white people as foreign, dangerous, or inferior. When I see clips like the ones in the video, I remember that over half of hate crimes are committed by white people, but sometimes the news only shows us other kinds of violence.”

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- **Intervening in the moment:** “I would like to remind us of our group agreement of [applicable group agreement]. Please make sure to share from your own experience and not make generalizations about others.”

# 3

## **Trauma-Informed Practices:**

The topic of anti-Asian racism may affect some students deeply. As such, we recommend the following practices in order to attend to students’ mental health.

- **Provide advance notice of the topic:** This may help them mentally prepare for what could be a heavy discussion.
- **Provide content warnings for graphic content and allow students to opt in:** Because the New York Times video has graphic content of physical assaults, offer a content warning when assigning it. (Example: “Content Warning: This video shows instances of anti-Asian physical assaults.”) Allow the video to be optional viewing due to its sensitive nature.
- **Offer suggestions for self-care and community care:** Remind students to be gentle with themselves, take deep breaths, get up and walk around if need be, and reach out to peers or their instructors if they need space to process.
- **Respect students’ needs:** Some students may check out emotionally, leave the group, or display intense reactions. Give students options in the moment, and do not push them to discuss their feelings. Follow up afterwards to see what students may still be needing. Take breaks as needed in order to allow the nervous system to re-regulate.
- **Practice your own self-care:** As facilitators, it is also important to assess your own capacity for viewing and discussing violence, especially for facilitators who may have personal connections to the content. Remember to take breaks in your own work, rest, engage in soothing activities, take time to process feelings, and connect with trusted friends and colleagues.

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# CIRCLE SCRIPT:

## ADDRESSING ANTI-ASIAN RACISM IN THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

*Short Version: 60 minutes, Long Version: 90 minutes*

**Circle Objective:** The purpose of this circle is to foster awareness, perspective-taking, and an allyship mindset regarding Asian American experiences of coronavirus-related racism. Students will be able to articulate why coronavirus racism is harmful, and name an action that they can do to intervene.

**Intended Audience:** High school students, middle school students (modifications may be necessary for younger students)

**Pre-Work:** Before the circle, share with students the following video, article, and worksheet to complete prior to the circle:

- **Video:** "Coronavirus Racism Infected My High School" by Katherine Oung (New York Times Op-Doc video), available [here](#).
- **Article Excerpt:** "Coronavirus: What attacks on Asians reveal about American identity" by Helier Cheung, Zhaoyin Feng & Boer Deng (BBC, May 27, 2020). The excerpt can be found in the Appendix. A simplified reading for middle school students has also been provided. If you would prefer to provide a longer excerpt, or the whole article, the full text is available [here](#).
- **Worksheet:** The worksheet can be found in the Appendix. Students will complete a short journal assignment responding to two prompts.

LOOK FOR TIPS ON ADAPTING THE SCRIPT  
TO ONLINE CIRCLES IN THESE BOXES

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# MATERIALS

1. **Seating**, arranged in a circle
2. **Printed agenda** for facilitator
3. **Whiteboard** or two blank sheets of easel paper
4. **Circle agenda** on whiteboard/easel paper for students: Introduction, Warm-Up Question, Values Round, Group Agreements, Round One, Break, Round Two (*Long version only*), Small Group Discussion, Closing
5. **Small sheets of paper**, such as note cards, or quartered printer paper (Two per participant)
6. **Markers** (One per participant)
7. **Centerpiece**: Item(s) with symbolic value placed in the circle's center, typically on a cloth. See examples pictured [here](#) with responses from Values round and Group Agreements, and [here](#).
8. **Talking piece**: Item with symbolic value that is passed around the circle to denote the speaker, such as a stone, a stuffed animal, or a small, durable trinket
9. **Recommended: Fidget items** (e.g. stress balls, playdough, simple puzzle toys, silly putty)

## ADJUSTMENTS TO MATERIALS FOR ONLINE CIRCLES

- Share online document of Circle Agenda with students
- Share photograph of centerpiece
- Encourage students in advance to find a comfortable, quiet place if possible, and to use a non-distracting fidget item like a stress ball, playdough, or a piece of paper to doodle on.

# CIRCLE AGENDA

## I. INTRODUCTION

5 min

Begin seated in a circle with participants. Share the following guidelines and reminders:

- **Intro:** The purpose of this circle is to discuss coronavirus-related anti-Asian racism, and to consider our roles in addressing prejudice.
- **Circle Items:** Briefly explain what the centerpiece was chosen to represent, as well as what the talking piece was chosen to represent.
- **Talking Piece:** It is always okay to pass when the talking piece comes by saying pass or simply handing the talking piece to the next person. If anybody passes, the talking piece will be circulated once more so that the people who passed get a second opportunity to share. **Not applicable for online circles.**
- **Facilitation:** Let students know that you will create group agreements together, and that you will not intervene unless the group agreements are broken.
- **Self-care:** Students should pay attention to their needs, and use the restroom or get water as needed in order to be able to listen and share with respect and attention.

## NOTES:

Share this if students have never sat in circle: "A restorative justice circle is used for building deeper relationships, listening from the heart, and speaking from the heart. People all over the world throughout history have used similar circles for dialogue and problem-solving. In a circle, all are equally valuable and important. We will use a talking piece so that everyone gets an opportunity to speak."

Facilitators are encouraged to participate. Share first when you want to model the length and content of response. Some facilitators always pass the talking piece left, in the direction of the heart.

## ONLINE ALTERNATIVES TO A TALKING PIECE

1. **Set order/Alphabetical.** Instructor determines a set order that is repeated for each question. Best for small groups.
2. **Popcorn method.** Instructor shares, then says "Popcorn\_\_\_\_ [Student name]." Each student popcorns until all have shared. Best for small-to-medium groups.
3. **Volunteer method.** Students volunteer their answers without a set order. Best for medium-to-large groups.

## II. WARM-UP QUESTION

5 min

- “In one word, what was your reaction to the material?”
- Depending on group familiarity, invite students to share names and gender pronouns as well.

## III. VALUES ROUND

10 min

- “What is a characteristic or value that you embody when you are at your best? On a great day, what value are you able to practice?”

Pass around the pieces of paper and markers, and have students write down a word or short phrase representing this value. Let students know that they will be invited to share their responses with the group.

Invite each student to read their value out loud and place it in the center of the circle. Remind students that these values anchor our time together by visually representing what we strive to be.

## IV. GROUP AGREEMENTS

10 min

- "What are some group agreements that you need in order to feel a sense of trust and respect in the circle?"

Pass the talking piece to have students share them, and write them down on the board/easel paper where they can be visible to all participants.

### NOTES

Some examples of values include patience, empathy, generosity, helping others, and thoughtfulness.

Some examples of group agreements include “Confidentiality,” “Make space, take space,” “Speak with “I” statements,” “Being mindful of each other’s lived experiences.”

It is not necessary for each student to craft a unique Group Agreement. Facilitator can add a check mark or star by agreements that students would like to “ditto.”

For online circles, have students verbally share ideas that instructor can type onto shared document, submit via a chat function, or add directly onto the document.

At the end, instructor can read out all agreements to the group.



## V. ROUND ONE

15 min (short), 20 min (long)

- “With the pre-work in mind, I invite you to briefly share one way that you think anti-Asian coronavirus racism is harmful. How might it affect people in our school/community?”

If extra time remains, add an additional prompt:

- “Some people have been calling coronavirus the “Chinese virus,” including some politicians. Why might it be harmful to call it this instead of its actual name?”
- “Sometimes, coronavirus racism comes in the form of joking. What might you say to someone who says it’s just a joke, so it’s not a big deal?”
- Or, if students have only been focusing on a certain aspect (policy, social relationships, mental health), invite them to consider an unaddressed dimension.

## VI. BREAK

5 min

Invite students to take a few minutes to stretch, get water, or use the restroom.

## VII. ROUND TWO

20 min (long version only)

- “In the video, we hear about how this is not the first time that prejudice and discrimination have increased during health epidemics. What do you think causes some people to blame and stereotype other groups of people during public health crises?”

Provide a definition of "stereotype" if necessary: "An often unfair and untrue belief of all people with a certain characteristic."

## NOTES

If students push back, you might allow the round to continue so that other students can respond, conduct an additional round, and/or intervene to remind students of the group agreements.

### Examples:

If a student is dismissive but not disrespectful (e.g. “I just don’t think this is a big deal”), allow the circle to respond.

If a student makes problematic generalizations (e.g. “Asian people eat bats”), instructor can intervene and refer to agreements (e.g. “We agreed to be respectful. Let’s not make comments about whole groups of people and focus on our own experiences.”)

If a student singles out another student (e.g. “Patrick, you’re Asian, do you care if I make jokes about that?”), instructor can intervene and refer to agreements (e.g. “Patrick should feel free to respond, but let’s keep in mind that we are talking about larger issues, and not singling out individuals.”)

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## VIII. SMALL GROUPS 5 min (short), 15 min (long)

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For this question, facilitator can quickly group neighboring students into groups of three.

- "What is something you want to see more people doing to address coronavirus racism? What is something you can personally commit to doing?"
- If time remains: "What should people in power do? Such as politicians, public health officials, and school leaders?"

**For the long version**, after discussing in small groups for 5 minutes, have students share out for 10 minutes regarding their takeaways. This can be done group-by-group or popcorned out.

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## XI. CLOSING 5 min (short), 10 min (long)

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Ask participants to consider the value they wrote down in the beginning of the circle. Ask them to take a moment to silently reflect on how this value relates to the issue of coronavirus racism.

- **For the short version:** "What is one word that describes how you are feeling after having this conversation?"
- **For the long version:** "Please share, in one sentence, what your value means to you in relation to this conversation."

Acknowledge the valuable work that participants have done, and remind participants that this work is ongoing. Thank participants for taking part in the circle.

For online circles, you may have students journal their responses before sharing, depending on time.

For the long version, you may choose to use breakout rooms if your video platform allows them. Ask students to take 5-10 minutes to discuss this question in groups of 3. Then, have students share out some of their takeaways and reflections to the whole group. Breakout rooms are not advisable for the short version.

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# RESOURCE LIST

## Restorative Justice Circles

1. Center for Restorative Process, “Restorative Circles Lesson Plan 1: Introduction to Circles,” available at <http://www.centerforrestorativeprocess.com/lesson-1.html>
2. Restorative Practices SFUSD, “Curriculum and Supporting Documents,” available at <https://www.healthiersf.org/RestorativePractices/Resources>

## Restorative Discipline in Schools

1. Morningside Center, “Restorative Conference to Repair Harm,” available at <https://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/restorative-conference-repair-harm>
2. IIRP, “Restorative Conference Facilitator Script,” available at <https://www.iirp.edu/news/restorative-conference-facilitator-script>
3. RTIPS, “Restorative Justice Circle Scripts” (See: “Harm circle”), available at <https://sites.google.com/a/cceb.org/rtips/rtips-in-schools/resources-for-administrators/restorative-justice-circle-scripts>
4. C. Boyes-Watson & K. Pranis, *Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community* [Book for purchase]

## Teaching about Race & White Supremacy

1. Teaching Tolerance, "Teaching 'The New Jim Crow,'" available at <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/teaching-the-new-jim-crow>
2. Teaching Tolerance, "Let's Talk! Discussing Race, Racism, and Other Difficult Topics with Students," available at <http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/TT%20Difficult%20Conversations%20web.pdf>
3. New York Times, "First Encounters with Race and Racism: Teaching Ideas for Classroom Conversations," available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/27/learning/lesson-plans/first-encounters-with-race-and-racism-teaching-ideas-for-classroom-conversations.html>
4. K. Haltinner (ed.), *Teaching Race and Anti-Racism in Contemporary America: Adding Context to Colorblindness*, Appendix 1, available at <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/bbm%3A978-94-007-7101-7%2F1.pdf>

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# APPENDIX - CONTENTS

- Article Excerpt from Helier Cheung, Zhaoyin Feng & Boer Deng, "Coronavirus: What attacks on Asians reveal about American identity," BBC (May 27, 2020).
- Simplified Reading for Middle School Students
- Word Bank & Definitions
- Pre-Circle Student Worksheet
- Post-Circle Student Worksheet

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## Background Reading

**Adapted from: "Coronavirus: What attacks on Asians reveal about American identity," by Helier Cheung & Zhaoyin Feng & Boer Deng, BBC News (May 27, 2020).**

Attacks on East Asian people living in the US have shot up during the pandemic, revealing an uncomfortable truth about American identity.

Though she was not born in the US, nothing about Tracy Wen Liu's life in the country felt "un-American". Ms Liu went to football games and volunteered at food banks. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the 31-year-old didn't think anything of being East Asian and living in Austin, Texas. "Honestly, I didn't really think I stood out a lot," she says.

That has changed. With the outbreak of the pandemic that has killed around 100,000 people in the US, being Asian in America can make you a target - and many, including Ms Liu, have felt it. In her case, she says a Korean friend was pushed and yelled at by several people in a grocery store, and then asked to leave, simply because she was Asian and wore a mask.

In states including New York, California, and Texas, East Asians have been spat on, punched or kicked - and in one case even stabbed. A spike in anti-Asian prejudice has left many Asians - which in the US refers to people of east or southeast Asian descent - wondering where they fit in American society.

Ms. Liu said, "...the pandemic made me realize that because I am Asian, and because of how I look like or where I was born, I could never become one of them."

Authorities in New York City and Los Angeles say that hate incidents against people of Asian heritage have increased, while a reporting center run by advocacy groups and San Francisco State University says it received over 1,700 reports of coronavirus-related discrimination from at least 45 US states since it launched in March.

Police in at least 13 states, including Texas, Washington, New Jersey, Minnesota and New Mexico, have also responded to reported hate incidents.

Critics say those at the very top have made things worse - both President Donald Trump, and Democratic hopeful Joe Biden have been accused of fueling anti-Asian racism based on the language they used to talk about China's role in the outbreak.

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And for many Asian Americans, it can feel as though, in addition to being targeted, their identity as Americans is being attacked.

## **How serious is anti-Asian prejudice in the US?**

Large numbers of Asian Americans, and Asians in the US - have described a sharp change in their experiences following the outbreak.

Kimberly Ha, 38, says she noticed the difference in February, after a stranger began shouting at her as she walked her dog in New York. "He yelled: 'I'm not scared of radioactive Chinese people' and started pointing at me, shouting 'you people shouldn't be here, get out of this country, I'm not scared of this virus that you people brought over,'" the Chinese Canadian, who has lived in New York for over 15 years, said.

In the weeks that followed, she also noticed that "about one in 10" people she encountered in public appeared angry when they saw her. "I've never felt that level of hostility before," she says.

Asian American rights groups and San Francisco State University started the STOP AAPI HATE database, which records reports of Covid-19 discrimination directed at Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the US. They received reports from 45 states, with the majority of reports from California and New York.

Russell Jeung, a professor of Asian American studies at San Francisco State University who has been running the database, says he found so many incidents of people "being coughed or spat upon" that he added it as an additional category.

That's what happened to Ted Nghiem, a Vietnamese American in Philadelphia. He says in March, a man swore at him, yelling "get out of here, you caused coronavirus." Later that month a man spat at him as he walked past, which got him "really down for a day or two".

The STOP AAPI HATE database is based on online self-reporting. About 70% of those incidents had a clear link to the pandemic, and about 40% of cases were reported to police.

*Excerpt adapted for educational use. Full text available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52714804>.*

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# PRE-WORK ARTICLE FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL

## **Coronavirus: Racism against Asians Increase in U.S.**

Since the Covid-19 pandemic began, Asian Americans are facing more harassment and racism because the disease outbreak started in China, a country in Asia.

Tracy Wen Liu, a Chinese American living in Austin, Texas, said that her friend was pushed and yelled at by several people in a grocery store, and then asked to leave, because she looked Asian. Ms. Liu said that this event made her feel like she did not belong in America, just because of the way she looks.

Ted Nghiem, a Vietnamese American man, was spat on by someone while walking on the street. The person who spat on him also told him to "get out of this country." Mr. Nghiem was very upset by the hatred that another person showed toward him.

Hateful actions against Asians have significantly increased since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Politicians and news reporters across America have used the names "Chinese virus" or "kung flu," causing people to blame others who look Asian for the disease.

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# WORD BANK

Asian American

Pandemic

Bullying

Prejudice

Coronavirus

Quarantine

Covid-19

Racism

Epidemic

Stereotype

Generalization

Xenophobia

Harassment

Hate Crime/Hate  
Incident

Hostility

Identity



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# WORD BANK DEFINITIONS

**Asian American** (n.) an American who has Asian ancestors or heritage

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**Bullying** (n.) hurting or making fun of someone else

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**Coronavirus** (n.) a virus that causes flu-like symptoms such as fever, cough, and shortness of breath

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**Covid-19** (n.) a disease caused by the new coronavirus; commonly used as a synonym for "coronavirus"

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**Epidemic** (n.) the spread of a disease within a community

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**Generalization** (n.) a broad statement

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**Harassment** (n.) behavior that annoys or creates an unpleasant situation for others

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**Hate Crime/  
Hate Incident** (n.) a crime that someone commits out of hatred against a group of people; for example, a crime committed because of the victim's race or religion

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**Hostility** (n.) unfriendly behavior that shows dislike

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**Identity** (n.) the characteristics that make somebody who they are

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**Pandemic** (n.) the spread of a disease over a large geographic area and affecting many people; a more severe form of an epidemic

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# WORD BANK DEFINITIONS, CONTINUED

**Prejudice** (n.) judgment of someone before you truly know them

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**Quarantine** (v.) keeping someone away from others to prevent the spread of disease

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**Racism** (n.) hatred of or prejudice against people of a certain race

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**Stereotype** (n.) an unfair and untrue belief about a group of people

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**Xenophobia** (n.) hatred of or prejudice against people from other countries

# PRE-CIRCLE JOURNALING

Name:

Date:

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**Review the resource(s) that have been assigned to you. Then respond to the following journal prompts.**

1. What is your initial reaction to the content in the article and/or video? What did it make you think about? How did it make you feel?

2. What surprised you about the content in the article and/or video, if anything?

# PRE-CIRCLE JOURNALING, CONTINUED

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**If you like, you may use the space below to brainstorm and write notes responding to these questions in preparation for our class. However, it is not required.**

**These are the questions we will be discussing:**

- After seeing the video and reading the article, what are some of the ways that you think anti-Asian coronavirus racism is harmful? How might it affect people in our school/community?
- In the video, we hear about how this is not the first time that prejudice and discrimination have increased during health epidemics. What do you think causes some people to blame and stereotype other groups of people during public health crises?
- What is something you want to see more people doing to address coronavirus racism? What is something you can personally commit to doing?



# POST-CIRCLE REFLECTION

Name:

Date:

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**Complete a journal entry based on the following prompts:**

- Share a moment in the circle that you found insightful or interesting. What about this moment stuck with you?
- Was there a moment in the circle when you disagreed with someone? Why?
- On the topic of racism, epidemics, and public health, what is something you would like to learn more about?
- What is another topic you would like to have a circle conversation about in the future?

