

**Did you know?** There is now a newly launched Antiracism & Equity Podcast. Hooray! Designed to be brief moments (less than 20 minutes), each episode offers food for thought and pause. Perfect for a bridge-containing commute, or an autumn walk. *New episodes drop on Wednesday.*



This week's question to consider:

**I get that sometimes we must hear uncomfortable things when talking about issues of racism. I do understand that, and I am in no way saying that people shouldn't have uncomfortable conversations. But... I wish it didn't sound so *angry*, you know? It's so much harder to take in when it is so harshly delivered. Can't we talk like calm, reasonable adults?**

*Pro tip:* Part of the work of antiracism involves listening to BIPOC pain, staring it right in the face, unflinching, without asking us to say it gently. It's not the only thing, of course, and it is important to celebrate Black joy and offer representation of Indigenous people and include People of Colour in discussions, but... BIPOC people don't owe you a gentle delivery of our pain. It is part of the work of antiracism to learn how take it in however it comes. If the teaching isn't always gentle, consider the place it is coming from. Remember that it is nothing to do with you, it is about expressing difficult things.

In talking about uncomfortable truths, inevitably, we must define tone policing.

Tone policing is a relatively new term. It was coined in 2015 by comic writer Robot Hugs in a comic entitled "No We Won't Calm Down, Tone Policing is Just Another Way to Protect Privilege." ([link](#))

People who employ tone policing effectively silence the speaker by criticizing and focusing on the emotion of a story, rather than the message itself. It's often an unconscious tactic, but it prevents people from telling their stories, since sometimes, telling a story is not possible without including the emotion behind it.

Some stories are just too hard.

### Culture & Volume

One of the running jokes in my family is this, "you always know when there are two Egyptian women in the same room; the volume suddenly becomes deafening."

It's not incorrect, not *exactly*, but let's examine why this might be.

**tone po·lic·ing**  
/'tɒn pə'lisɪŋ /

*noun*

the action or practice of criticizing the angry or emotional manner in which a person has expressed a point of view, rather than addressing the substance of the point itself.

source: Oxford Languages, [Dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com)  
retrieved: 4 October 2022

From my point of view as a first-generation Egyptian immigrant living in a predominantly white place, the excitement of speaking to someone who looks like me contributes to the volume of my voice. I recently took a taxi, wherein the driver was an Egyptian who insisted on introducing me to a very well-known Egyptian singer. I was trying to communicate to him that I knew who this was, in English, but his level of English was (we ultimately discovered) equivalent to my level of Egyptian at the time, and at first trying to communicate was not clear. In the end, we managed to find a common ground, but that process resulted in a lot of volume, which is natural, particularly in my culture. Once we recognized each other's abilities, the volume got even louder. Again, the excitement of understanding.

Knowing that volume is in correlation to increased understanding is important when speaking to a stranger. I was in a car with an Egyptian man. Had I not understood that very important aspect of language, his speech may have made me wonder if he was getting worked up in a way that would be a danger to me. I would then worry about my safety as a woman. Intersections! They are always present.

There are many other cultural aspects to language. Focusing still on the Egyptian dialect of Arabic as an example, it can sound harsh or loud to the untrained ear, so there are many reasons that a conversation among Arabic-speaking people would be perceived as excessively loud, or potentially aggressive, to unfamiliar locals. And this is the thing: volume does not automatically equate to anger.

Again, thinking of Egyptian, the letter that comes to mind is the one that makes the "kha" sound. That guttural sound is uttered at the back of the throat. That sound, the "kha", is a letter that does not exist in the English alphabet, so, its sound is unfamiliar. Without context it can be perceived as a negative sound. But look at it! It's so pretty!



Another consideration is that the speed at which a language is spoken can vary widely, so where in one language a fast rate of speech can indicate agitation, in another, it is the typical rate of speech. These nuances all contribute to form a general impression and contribute to how a speaker is perceived.

All this to say that the concept of culture as associated with enthusiasm can give people pause at first exposure. It's important not to conflate the two.

### **The Label of the Angry Black Woman**

To understand what tone policing can do, consider *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, a sitcom from the 90s centered on a Black American family. In that show, the character of Aunt Viv was originally played by Janet Louise Hubert, who was a vibrant, Black woman that was entertainingly unapologetic in her take on the role. If you've seen the show, you may recall the episode when Aunt Viv, dressed in a pale pink leotard, attended a dance class, and executed a fierce, unexpected command of a newly taught dance routine, only to collapse right outside the door, her pride intact but her body exhausted. (This is a *chef's kiss* excellent piece of television history, truly. [Here is a link to a video of that dance.](#))

In the reunion show for *The Fresh Prince*, a few things came to light regarding her replacement in the fourth season of the show. One, she wasn't fired, she was offered a terrible contract and turned it down. Two, the young titular actor, Smith, made things more difficult for her than he had to, and ended up derailing her progress in Hollywood by exercising his power to have her removed from the show. There are certainly other details, but in watching that reunion show, there is very much a tone of "You painted me as an Angry Black Woman, and you and I both know that an Angry Black Woman doesn't get any work in Hollywood." They seem to have resolved things, and Smith admitted to doing her dirty, but this nevertheless constitutes an example of how quickly a label can derail a career. Here is a link to a [Looper article](#) about this, dated January 2022.

## Intersectionality

The Fresh Prince of Bel Air was very much a thirty-years-ago show, brought back to relevance by a potential (are they doing it? I am unsure) reboot and that reunion show earlier this year. By contrast, Marvel has been churning out new stories and shows left, right, center, bottom, underneath, over, under, everywhere. All kinds of spin off stories, all kinds of formats. One of the many programs they have put together is the relatively new *She-Hulk*. The reason I bring it up during this discussion of tone policing and anger is that here we have a truly beautiful example in media of what we're talking about here, and how the intersection of anger and skin colour and gender all play a role.

For those who are unfamiliar, Hulk is a character with anger issues. Essentially, the person that is Bruce Banner gets angry, loses his temper, and becomes the Incredible Hulk, an enormously muscular and indestructible green figure who is very capable of smashing things and seems to like doing so. Hulk smash is a catchphrase at some point.

I realize this is a simplistic explanation, but it will serve for the purposes of this discussion.

Now, Marvel has spent several movies on the story arc that is Bruce learning to harness his feelings and control his anger to the point that he isn't overtaken with his baser instincts (Hulk! Smash!), who then becomes enormous and un... um... smashable.

In the new (2022) *She-Hulk*, Bruce's cousin gets these powers too. Let's not dwell on how this happens (it's a weak plot point and just serves to make it happen quickly). The interesting part is how Bruce, who by this time has now achieved some measure of control over his Hulk self, takes it upon himself to teach his cousin, Jen, aka She-Hulk, to control her powers.

Thing is, she understands how almost immediately. A woman was involved with this decision, and I'll tell you why: the approach is logical and strikes such a chord for how women move in the world.

In this series, Bruce Banner is a white man. His cousin, Jen, is a white woman. (Note, the show does have a diverse cast, which is excellent to see.) She-Hulk takes no time at all to adjust to this aspect of her new reality. This is because that ability, controlling emotions, is a skill that women are required to develop in this society. This means that most of the time, women know how to manage anger. Believe me when I say that by and large, women understand and learn how to present ourselves in a certain way, for our own safety in this world. We are careful when rejecting men, so that they won't harass us (or worse). We smile when we gently say no. We check the backseat of the car. We walk during daylight. We take care in how we move. We make ourselves small in crowded spaces. We plan how we leave places. We go places in packs. There is a section of our brain that is devoted to safety. All of this... for a reason. It's nerve-wracking to go to your car in the dark, late at night, in a deserted parking lot. We have been taught that we aren't safe in the world and must guard against that reality.

Having taken a 20-minute episode's time to first realize that she has these interesting new capabilities, and how to change between her two forms neither having to be furious to go green nor calm to go back to human form (unlike Bruce and Hulk in his first twenty movies\*), we move on in the story immediately without having to focus on this whole "getting emotions under control" aspect of being a Hulk, so to speak.

That moment made me laugh in recognition because of course she would immediately understand that aspect of navigating the world. She's already been doing it for years.

All of this to say... tone policing is a thing, BIPOC people owe no one their calm explanation of terrible things, and sometimes anger will come out. Doing the work of antiracism looks like that sometimes; these stories aren't calm, happy stories. It's helpful to hold space for emotion, especially anger, and it's also helpful to remember that [anger is a secondary emotion](#), hurt often the underlying primary one that lives behind the anger.

To use an analogy, think of carrying a very large, very full glass of water from one location to the next. And you're walking a tightrope. And there is a crowd, making noise. And your hand is sweaty. It's like that. Consider how difficult that might be with a glass of water that is beyond full, with the surface tension in action, water expanding above the rim in a curve but not spilling over. (Oh hey [van der Waals bonds](#), it's been 20 years but I remember you. Vaguely. Fondly, but vaguely.) And then a sudden move to the left, and SPLOOSH. Water all over your hand, maybe on your feet, on the cat. (No, I don't know why there's a cat, but there is always a cat.)

Anyway, that's what managing charged emotions can feel like, especially when we are not rested, or are stressed, or are on edge. Sometimes the emotions we've been holding in spill over. So, perhaps when someone spills over, one drop too many in that glass, or in reaction to an unexpected nudge... maybe hand them a towel and give them your calm.

Consider: it is a person's privilege that requires delivery to cater to their comfort. But this isn't comfortable. And if you are in the space of learning, this is part of what it means to do the work. You can handle the words that reflect the experience. Even if those words are loud, uncomfortable to hear, with a tone you aren't used to. You can hear it and take it in as additional context. I believe in you.

### *Recommended Resources*

Francesca Ramsey Twitter Thread (June 2020) | [Tone Policing](#)  
Everyday Feminism (2015) | No, We Won't Calm Down – Tone Policing is Just Another Way to Protect Privilege  
Medium Article by E. Stallings (January 2020) | [When Black Women Go From Office Pet to Office Threat](#)  
Tone Policing Wikipedia Entry (*accessed Oct 4, 2022*) | [Tone Policing](#)

Occasionally angry, which is perfectly valid (don't at me),

Your (mostly) friendly neighbourhood Anti-Racism & Equity Coach  
Therese Trofimencoff (*she/they*)

\* Twenty is an exaggeration. Probably. I mean... I haven't fact-checked this figure.