

Understanding and dealing with racial trauma

Racial trauma is the cumulative traumatic effect of repeated experiences of racism and discrimination, including exposure to media coverage of acts of racism and race-based violence. Any one of these experiences can trigger reactions of fear and anxiety or feelings of exclusion or rejection. Alone, they are hurtful and can cause the body and mind to shift into a hyperalert or discouraged and downhearted state. Together, over time, they can build up into an enduring and damaging form of trauma. Each new event can trigger memories of past experiences, bring up painful emotions, and reinforce negative thought patterns.

These hidden wounds that Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and other minority people experience from repeated exposure to racism and discrimination are worn like weights. They can drag us down emotionally and impact our physical health. And each new cut can add to the pain.

What can cause racial trauma?

The experience of racism and discrimination in our culture is pervasive, and racial trauma can be its toxic effect. Experiences that can combine to cause racial trauma include the following:

Day-to-day microaggressions

Statements like “What are you?” to a person with brown skin, or “What country are you from?” to a person who was born in this country, may go unnoticed by a White person making the unthinking comment, but they can be deeply hurtful to the person on the receiving end. The almost unconscious glances and body movements showing fear or wariness when a Black person walks by are also microaggressions. If these incidents were rare, they might be no big deal. But they aren’t rare, and they are experienced in the context of a culture with deeply embedded structures of racism that continue to favor White over Black and brown people.

Experiences of discrimination and bias

These experiences can start early: being labeled a behavior problem in school for simply being a rambunctious, young boy because of a teacher’s unconscious racial bias, or growing up in a less desirable neighborhood because of the lasting effects of institutional racism in housing. And they can continue through life: unequal access to higher education; being denied job opportunities or passed over for a promotion because of conscious or unconscious racial bias; encounters with police that are more frequent and more fraught with risk for Black and brown people than for White people.

The emotional strain of acculturation

Sometimes, the behavior Black and brown people adopt to succeed in a predominately White workplace or to fit into a predominately White community can involve hiding their true selves. They may find themselves acting cautiously, concealing their emotions, and controlling their reactions to racist comments. This can be an emotional strain that contributes to racial trauma.

Indirect experiences of racism

This includes exposure to media coverage of acts of violence against Black, Latinx, Indigenous, or other minority individuals. These incidents are shocking in themselves—to people of any race. But they can be especially painful to people who have had related experiences of racism and discrimination and can identify strongly with the person who has been injured or killed. An act of police brutality against a Black man or woman can trigger powerful, visceral emotions in other Black people. They see in the injured or murdered person someone who could have been their child, their sister or brother, or their father or mother. Their minds flash back to other, similar incidents where ordinary Black people have died at the hands of police or White citizens, and to experiences in their own lives where they have felt threatened and afraid, made to feel unwelcome, or dismissed as less than fully human. This empathic response to an indirect experience is called vicarious trauma. We feel it as if we had been directly involved.

What are the effects of racial trauma?

The combined effect of all of these types of experienced racism and discrimination can build to toxic levels of stress. The body produces a constant stream of stress hormones to maintain a hypervigilant state in reaction to past and anticipated threats. Our minds remain on high alert as if we are in constant danger. And, in a sense, we are. Racism is real and it's all around us.

Those feelings of stress and fear are exacerbated by a society that refuses to accept the realities of racism. Too often, our objections to microaggressions and acts of discrimination are met with defensiveness and denial, or even with rage. The problem is in us, we're told. We're too sensitive. Or, there's another rational reason for what has happened that has nothing to do with race. So not only do we feel the pain of the experience, but those feelings are also often invalidated, which only makes us feel worse—more isolated, less confident, sadder, or angrier.

Racial trauma is similar in some ways to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in its effects on the body and mind. But unlike PTSD, the causes of racial trauma are ongoing. There is no “post” to the trauma. It does not end, at least not in our current society with its deeply rooted systems of racial bias and segregation. So, any healing or protection from the trauma must happen while the injuries continue.

Not everyone experiences racial trauma in response to these emotional injuries of course. Some people even gain strength from them. They have resilience grounded in emotional self-control, strong social connections, and deep pride in who they are.

Among those who experience racial trauma, effects may include:

- Physical and behavioral symptoms
- Sleep problems
- Increased alcohol or drug use
- Exhaustion, anger, irritability, or resentment
- Behavior problems at school or work • Shaken confidence in basic beliefs
- A diminished sense of safety, trust, self-esteem, and control
- A heightened sense of vigilance and suspicion
- Distrust of people outside one's family or social network
- Wariness of institutions and organizations (government, social services, police, corporations)
- Sensitivity to threat and risk avoidance
- Avoidance of new situations and of taking risks
- Greater sensitivity to experiences of disrespect or shaming
- Psychological and physiological symptoms
- Chronic stress
- A weakened immune system
- Increased risk of depression and anxiety
- A shift in brain activity to limbic system dominance (emotional and impulsive thinking)
- Skewed frames of reference
- Distortions in world view, spirituality, or sense of identity
- Distortions in perception and memory
- Unfounded beliefs
- Intrusive thoughts
- Loss of hope and meaning
- Increased doubt and distrust
- Negativism
- Existential despair

How to Heal the Wounds of Racial Trauma

When culture functions well, it buffers members from at least some of the disruptive impacts and consequences of collective trauma. Racial trauma is, in large part, an effect of cultural dysfunction—of entire groups of people being treated unfairly and having their experiences invalidated by the dominant culture. True healing requires the correction of these cultural injustices, but individuals can take steps toward healing while living in our imperfect world:

Restore pride in who you are

Learn about the positive aspects of your culture and heritage. Immerse yourself in movies, books, music, and art that demonstrate and reinforce those positive views. Seek out people who recognize your true strengths and value you for who you are.

Learn about your cultural history and the actions taken to make a better future

Oppression and injustice have caused generations of pain and hardship, but they have also fostered resilience and an enduring struggle for change. Learn about that history and the courageous actions and enlightened ideas of those who have led and continue to lead the struggle for justice and respect.

Connect with others

Social support is among the most effective emotional medicines. Build your social network. Find people you can talk with. Having a core group of people who care about each other and support each other through life's ups and downs can help you heal from trauma and protect you from further injury.

Develop a sense of understanding and acceptance of racial issues

This opens the door to dialogue about issues related to race. This doesn't mean accepting racism as OK. It means accepting it as a reality, learning ways to deal with it within yourself, and figuring out how to take action for change.

Talk about race with people who will understand your experiences. Racial trauma is often made worse by having your experiences of bias and disrespect ignored or denied by the dominant culture. Talk about race with people who can validate your experiences, share similar experiences of their own, and talk through ways to respond that counter the negative effects of racism. This kind of racial storytelling gives you and others a chance to bring painful feelings about racial encounters out of hiding and think critically about events in your lives.

Participate in community activities, especially those that work toward change

Challenge the negativity in yourself and others by joining with others to take positive action. The Black Lives Matter movement is about healing racial trauma, ending police brutality, and addressing the many aspects of structural racism. Other local and national groups are working to help undocumented immigrants, provide opportunities for youth, advocate for tenants, feed the hungry, and be a voice for the incarcerated. Helping others and joining a community of people with a common cause can make the world a better place while restoring your optimism, strength, and resilience.

Practice the process of naming experiences

This is what happens when we say the names of Black or Latinx people who have died at the hands of the police or in other incidents of unjust violence. We remember and honor them, and when we do it together, it gives us strength. Naming events from your own experience can help you remember and make sense of their emotional impact on you.

Be honest about your feelings and your needs

Racial trauma can distort our thinking and cause us to misdirect our emotions. We can turn the pain inward, onto ourselves or the people we love. As you think and talk about the impact of race on your life, challenge yourself to be honest about your feelings and open about your needs.

Ask for help

The emotional damage from racial trauma can lead to unhealthy and self-destructive behaviors and thought patterns. A professional therapist who understands the pain caused by race in our society can help you re-channel rage, challenge negative thoughts, and build self-esteem and resilience. One helpful resource for Black people seeking a racially aware therapist is www.AfricanAmericanTherapists.com) With help, you can develop psychological, emotional, and behavioral resources that can act as a protective shield in the face of future indignities and devaluations. Spiritual help can offer much of this same protection if you find a faith leader or fellow worshippers who acknowledge and validate your pain and give you comfort and strength.

*Source: Excerpted and adapted from the book **Rated Black: A Parent's Underground Guide to Dealing with Police**, by Dr. Kennette Thigpen (Swiner Publishing, 2019).*