

Race-Based Traumatic Stress



The Mecca of Black Wellness



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Racism is traumatic. It is a mental and public health issue, indeed. Systemic racism, or the systems designed to maintain and perpetuate racial injustice, is associated with detrimental health effects, such as depression, anxiety, and hypertension among Black people living in the United States and globally. Experiences of racism compound and can have lasting effects on one's mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual health. Race-based traumatic stress, or racial trauma, occurs as a result of experiencing institutional and systemic racism, as well as interpersonal instances of discrimination and harassment.

Racial trauma can occur as a result of directly or indirectly experiencing racism. Secondary trauma, or secondary traumatic stress, refers to the indirect trauma that can happen when witnessing racism or being exposed to videos and stories of others experiencing racism. Any type of threat associated with race can be linked to experiencing symptoms of racial trauma. Potential threats include exposure to racial stereotypes, fearing personal safety, and witnessing members of a person's racial group experiencing harm.

Racial trauma can also be passed down generationally, which is known as Intergenerational Trauma. Intergenerational Trauma refers to the effects of historical and collectively traumatic events that are experienced by a group across generations. This includes transgenerational traumatic events such as slavery, the Holocaust, and colonization of Native Americans. Descendants who have not directly experienced a traumatic event can still display signs and symptoms of trauma. Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, a term and theory developed by Dr. Joy DeGruy, speaks to the traumatic effects of centuries of slavery followed by institutionalized racism and continued racial oppression that still exists today.

The symptoms of racial trauma mirror symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The symptoms include the following:

- Re-experiencing trauma/distressing events
- Difficulty focusing and concentrating; distraction related to racist experiences
- Avoidance of potential risks to exposure
- Physical arousal, such as body aches and rapid heartbeat
- Negative moods (depression, anxiety, hypervigilance)
- Negative thoughts about oneself, racial group, or other people
- Feeling detached from others
- Sense of foreshortened future or limited possibilities
- Chronic Stress

In addition to symptoms of PTSD, racial trauma can have other symptoms and signs, including:

- **Dissociation** - feeling numb or disconnected from oneself or others
- **Weathering** - chronic health effects of exposure to racial discrimination and trauma over time: Black Americans typically have worse overall health and higher risks of cardiovascular disease and other ailments.
- **Prolonged Trauma and poor mental health** - racial discrimination is ongoing, which makes it extremely difficult to recover from the effects

What Can You Do?

It's critical to acknowledge that healing racial trauma is especially challenging, because racial wounds occur on a continuing basis, as systemic racism is rampant. Additionally, current definitions of trauma, traumatic stress, and trauma treatment are embedded in European perspectives.

However, below are activities that can foster nurturance, build resilience, and promote wellbeing:

- Care for your body - exercise, eat well, and rest regularly
- Take breaks from social media - monitor contact with toxicity and cruelty
- Engage in spiritual practices and soul care, such as prayer and meditation
- Connect with your community and surround yourself with people who can understand and validate your experiences
- Embrace feelings that come up as a result of injustice. All are valid.
- Pursue joy and be intentional about creating opportunities to laugh and enjoy life
- Work with a therapist who can effectively understand and support you
- Get involved in activism in your community; focus on your sphere of influence

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