

#racialtraumaisreal

Alumni Advisory Group

Institution for the Study and Promotion of Race and Culture

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Race is a long-standing and often controversial topic in the United States. Recent national events in the fall of 2014 and beginning of 2015 have reignited a national conversation about race relations.

Despite assertions of a more just society and claims of a post-racial America, events following the lack of grand jury indictments in the recent deaths of [Michael Brown](#), [Eric Garner](#), and [John Crawford III](#), highlight a tale of two perspectives. Furthermore, the police-involved shooting deaths of unarmed Black girls and women, such as [Aiyana Stanley-Jones](#), [Tarika Wilson](#), and [Yvette Smith](#), highlight the legacy of disregard and brutality toward Black bodies. For some, this is a tale of the clear continued existence of institutional, structural, and interpersonal racism. For others, bewilderment, confusion, coincidence and denial are the common narrative.

Regardless of a person's previous awareness of racism, many people of Color may find themselves struggling to process their reactions to the deaths of Michael Brown, John Crawford III, Eric Garner, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, and Yvette Smith, as well as the lack of indictments of the police officers who killed these men. Anger, sadness, fear, feelings of helplessness, exhaustion, rage, and the desire to act may emerge at unpredictable times in an unpredictable manner.

Racial trauma is one term used to describe the physical and psychological symptoms that people of Color often experience after exposure to particularly stressful experiences of racism (Carter, 2007). Similar to survivors of other types of trauma (e.g., sexual assault survivors), people of Color often experience fear and hypervigilance, headaches, insomnia, body aches, memory difficulty, self-blame, confusion, shame, and guilt after experiencing racism (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Carter, 2007, Carlson, 1997; Helms, Nicolas, & Green, 2010). When the experiences of racism are more frequent, the consequences tend to be more acute and deleterious (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005). And, these racism experiences never exist in isolation; racial trauma is a cumulative experience, where every personal or vicarious encounter with racism contributes to a more insidious, chronic stress (Carter, 2007). Experiencing racism brings up both previous experiences with racism, as well as a person's awareness of the longstanding history of racism directed toward similar others in the US (Helms et al., 2010; Utsey & Ponterotto, 1996). Historical race-related events play a significant role in shaping how people of Color view racism. For many people of Color, early racial socialization experiences often include listening to their parents' and grandparents' stories of living through different periods of racial tension in the U.S., including the Civil Rights movement, Jim Crow laws, and for some slavery (Shenk, 2000). While the passing down of these stories is an essential part of educating and socializing the younger generation about race and racism, the transmission of racial trauma is often carried across multiple generations as a result. The cumulative emotional effects and psychological wounding that is transmitted across generations is also known as intergenerational trauma (Rakoff, Sigal, & Epstein, 1966) can result in higher rates of mental health and physical health issues within communities of Color.

Many mental health professionals and scholars have called for the recognition of racial trauma as a mental health concern. Too many accounts from student trainees, colleagues, and professionals demonstrate a lack of awareness, knowledge, and the practical skills needed to address such concerns. This obliviousness exists despite a pervasive body of literature that has explicitly stated that for many clients of Color, awareness of race and racial factors (e.g., racism, racial discrimination) is an important determinant in their ability to seek, continue, and benefit from mental health interventions.

We offer our recommendations as mental health professionals and advocates of the study and promotion of racial and cultural understanding and discussion. Specifically, we are hoping these recommendations will serve as a much-needed resource for people of Color. Many have written about the importance of repeated race-related traumatic events, but we felt few were speaking to the broad mental health impact we as a community are experiencing as both witnesses, participants, and mental health practitioners.

Acknowledge

There is no one way or “*right*” way to react. It is important to be aware and accept what you are feeling and thinking. Individuals or groups may respond to experiences of trauma differently. Developmental age and ability to express one’s emotions can all affect whether or not a person wants to talk about the traumatic event or if verbalizing her or his emotions poses too much of a challenge. As such, younger children are going to experience and respond to traumatizing events in a different manner than adults. Therefore, it is important to actively check in with family and friends, including children. When doing so, pay attention to your nonverbal communication, as well as that of the person you are engaging. Our nonverbal behaviors are often a good way to communicate support, acknowledgement, and validation. Alternatively, attempting to multitask while checking in (e.g., scrolling through your cell phone) and partially listening can lead to feelings of disconnection, resentment, or invalidation.

Some helpful ways to increase self-awareness are journaling, practicing [mindful body scans](#) to check your body for signs of stress and anxiety, and active reflection. Such activities can all serve to increase the ability to identify the range of emotions and physical reactions you may be experiencing, all of which are normal and should not be discounted.

Discuss

At times, it can be helpful to openly discuss your experiences following racially traumatizing situations. Talk to those that you trust, including: friends, family, confidantes, colleagues, and spiritual leaders. Open discussion can help to minimize the tendency to internalize negative racial experiences, which can lead to feelings of anger, sadness, or anxiety. Speaking to others who may have similar reactions can also be normalizing and validating. It is however helpful to be cautious about engaging in repetitive discussions with the same person, which may exacerbate negative reactions.

Determining when and how to engage in discussion, also requires some considerations. It is important to note that not everyone may serve as a source of support. Sometimes you may feel that discussions centering on the topic of race are more beneficial when they are confined to those with whom you closely identify racially and/or ethnically. This advisory is not always accurate, however. Just because a friend or family member has assisted you in navigating a difficult emotional experience previously, does not mean he or she is able to provide mutually-engaging and affirming

conversations about racial topics. It may be necessary to avoid some people who you know *or* have recently encountered who may negatively impact your mood.

A person's ability to listen to your perspective, validate your experiences, and communicate an understanding of race and racism from a social, political, and historical context is most important. You may find that White allies, as well as People of Color, are able to engage in dialogue that is growth fostering. Progressive, nurturing cross-racial communication may also serve as a needed reminder to avoid gross generalizations regarding individuals from specific racial backgrounds. In other words, not all People of Color will understand issues of racism and discrimination in the same manner. Likewise, not all White people are incapable of understanding racism and lack the desire to promote social justice. White persons who embody a healthy and sophisticated racial consciousness are aware of racial systems of privilege, are able to discuss racism, recognize how it affects them personally, and, most importantly, act in an effort to combat racial discrimination.

Seek Support

There are times when seeking guidance and support from others will help to facilitate positive coping and management of racial trauma responses. For some, beginning the process of self-exploration with a counseling professional at your workplace or local community agency will be beneficial. For others, guidance from trusted mentors, spiritual leaders, or religious organizations and groups may offer needed counsel and collective support.

Self Care

The range of emotional and behavioral responses as a result of racial trauma requires proactive planning in order to begin the process of coping and healing. Self-care is a commonly recommended survival skill to promote a balance between mental and physical rest and activity and social interaction, especially in high stress situations. Self-care is deliberate and should be self-initiated to promote and maintain overall wellness. Whether done in groups or individually, the key is to minimize negative intake of information, including social media outlets or discussions, in an effort to enhance personal wellbeing. Self-care should involve activities that bring some pleasure and promote a healthy lifestyle to offset the effects of race-based stressors.

In an effort to buffer the emotional and physical consequences of racial trauma, one should plan activities that promote a healthy mind, body, and spirit. Internal coping strategies, such as mindfulness practices, meditation, reading, prayer, or other indigenous healing systems and faith practices serve to promote optimal mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. They can offer encouragement, hope, and counter the often negative interactions and messaging present. Engaging in activities that allow you to process your emotions externally is also important. Painting, drawing, spoken word recitations, singing, or dancing provide a means to continue to process emotions through expression and body movement. Such activities are helpful as they may facilitate a release of "pent up" thoughts and feelings.

Empowerment through Resistance

Experiences of racism and discrimination can lead to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. After all, one does not *ask* to be treated negatively based on one's racial categorization. Prolonged personal experiences or the continued witnessing of racial discrimination can prompt avoidance, fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, or lack of motivation. To combat such feelings, for many it is important to engage in activities that may make them feel empowered and seek to promote change. Be proactive by channeling the hurt, anger, and feelings of hopelessness and helplessness that you

are feeling by participating in social-change activities in your community. In doing so, you can use your voice to speak out against racial injustices. For example, if issues of race and culture are not discussed in your institution, some are moved to find ways to implement workshops that challenge the status quo and start dialogue. Consider making recommendations for consultants to assist in this process, as taking on such a role yourself may feel burdensome and lead to increased frustration. One can also look for local groups that are organizing protests against racism. If you do not wish to personally join a group or organization, consider signing petitions or giving monetary support to activist groups.

It is also important to stay connected to family and friends, community, neighborhood, and spiritual communities for shared wisdom and support and collective strength. Participation in protests with community and family is one way to cope and support one another through connection, solidarity, and strength across generations.

Other ways to feel empowered may involve mentoring youths or personal commentary. Mentoring programs that serve younger generations and teach them about racial-cultural issues and how to deal with systemic racism provide opportunities for connection and taking action against injustice. Acts of empowerment and resistance can also come through writing blogs, editorials, or poetry. If publishing your work publically online it often helpful to think about limiting exposure to the comments section that follows many online publications.

The aforementioned comments offer some guidance for how to identify, cope, and manage racial trauma. In essence, it may be a good idea to create what we refer to as the Racism Recovery Plan (RRP). The RRP is likely more beneficial when developed in advance of heightened experiences of racial trauma. It is based on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration supported work of Mary Ellen Copeland (see [Copeland, 2002](#)). Our hope is that a RRP can be created individually or in groups and used as a tool to ground oneself in the midst of racial trauma experiences. See table below.

Racism Recovery Plan Steps

1	Racial Wellness Toolbox	Describe what you are like when you are managing and responding to racism in a healthy manner.
2	Daily Maintenance of Centeredness in the Face of Racism	List connections or tools that help you maintain your centeredness in the face of racism. Such items can include, but are not limited to: a) Review Racial Identity Theory (see Helms); b) Connect with friends who are equally or better able to engage in conversations about racial awareness; c) Engage in prayer, spiritual practices or use of mantras; d) Engage in activism; and e) Practice self-management, such as healthy eating, exercise, and favorite activities that help you feel centered
3	Racial Trauma Triggers and Response Plan	List items or experiences that tend to result in racial trauma symptoms (e.g., anger, isolation, sadness). After each item or experience identify a specific centeredness response (e.g., calling a friend, writing in your journal, activism).
4	Racial Trauma Early Warning Signs & Response Plan	List early warning signs that you are experiencing racial trauma (e.g., body aches, fatigue, anxiety, depression, difficulty sleeping) and related ways of coping from your Daily Maintenance of Centeredness (item #2) coping skills list.
5	Acute Racial Trauma & Response Plan	List signs that you are experiencing acute racial trauma (e.g., hypervigilance; heightened emotional experiences, such as depression, anxiety, and anger, which compromise your ability to engage in chosen activities of work, sleep, or school). Identify an action plan for each item on your list.
6	Crisis Planning	Ask yourself how you would know if you were experiencing a crisis due to racism (e.g., thoughts of harm to others and/or self; inability to care for self and/or others; acute racial trauma symptoms that last longer than a specified duration). List a person(s) or additional resources to contact in the event you experience such a crisis.
7	Post Crisis Planning	List ways of reconnecting with yourself and your communities to regain centeredness in the face of racism.

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