

CONNECTIONS

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Coping with Racial Trauma

By Arlyn Gonzalez, LCSW, MSW, City of Madison EAP

Racial trauma refers to the cumulative effects of being exposed to stressful experiences of racism, directly or indirectly. Repeated exposure to racial trauma can cause an individual to experience PTSD or PTSD-like symptoms including fear, hypervigilance, insomnia, body aches, self-blame, inability to concentrate, confusion, shame, and guilt. It is important to take care of yourself, especially during this historical time where we are constantly being exposed to race-based trauma. Below are some tips and suggestions to take care of your overall wellbeing.



Self-Awareness

- Every individual experiences and copes with trauma differently.
- Get to know yourself better: what are your warning signs and what symptoms do you experience when triggered (i.e., body aches, fatigue, anxiety, difficulty sleeping, etc.).
- Reflect on experiences that tend to illicit racial trauma symptoms and find ways to combat each such as calling a friend, writing in your journal, expressing yourself via activism, etc.
- Actively reflect on the range of emotions that you are experiencing. Accept those feelings and thoughts.

Seek Support

- To minimize the tendency to internalize negative racial experiences, it is important to seek support by talking about the experience and its impact.
- Talk to your support system (i.e., friends, family, and confidants).
- Seek personal growth/support through the use of mental health professionals.

Regain Control

- Seek guidance from trusted mentors about ways to regain your power and control.
- Engage in activities that make you feel empowered.
- Find ways to center yourself and combat racism in ways that are safe and comfortable for you such as through connecting with others that are racially aware, engaging in spiritual practices, educating others, or engaging in activism.

Self-Care

- Racial trauma can have negative impacts on an individual's emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing.
- Set boundaries when you can no longer discuss what's happening.
- It is okay to disconnect from social media.
- Find people who understand and validate your emotions.
- Remind yourself that you matter.
- Create healthy coping mechanisms.
- Avoid toxins.
- Remember to breathe.
- Get rest.
- Exercise.
- Eat nutritious food.
- Find other ways to decompress such as practicing mindfulness, journaling, or drawing.

If you want to talk, vent, or need support please reach out to your EAP. EAP counselors can also make referrals to mental health professionals with specific identities including to providers of color who can better address your needs. Don't hesitate to reach out, we are here to assist you!

Hello City
Employees!

This month we wanted to focus on the mental health aspect of racism by acknowledging and starting the conversation about the link between racism and PTSD. Additionally, we want to provide you with some ideas for taking care of yourself by learning more about how to cope with racial trauma.

Finally, we wanted to bring you some tools from Mental Health America about owning your feelings and eliminating toxic people.

We hope that you all are doing well and staying safe.

~ The EAP Team



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ELIMINATING TOXIC INFLUENCES



Certain people and situations in life can trigger us to feel badly about ourselves or engage in destructive behaviors. Identifying the toxic influences in our lives and taking steps to create boundaries or a new life without them can improve mental and physical health over time.

TRAITS OF TOXIC PEOPLE



Manipulation. Toxic people are often very good at manipulation. They may seem to be genuinely interested in your company and getting to know you at first, but will eventually use the knowledge they gain about you to try and get you to do what they want. They will often twist your words or make you feel guilty to get their way.



They make you feel bad about yourself. Insults are the most direct way that toxic people can make you feel bad, but most of the time the ways they affect your self-esteem are more subtle. When you are feeling happy or proud of yourself, they will find ways to “rain on your parade” or downplay your achievements. They might also act like they are smarter than you to make you feel dumb or insignificant.



Being judgemental. Everyone can be judgemental from time to time, but a toxic person is judgemental almost all of the time. They see things in black and white and criticize anything that they don’t agree with or approve of, instead of considering the circumstances or the feelings of other people.



Negativity. Some people just can’t seem to see the good in life. They will find something bad about everything and aren’t able to find joy in anything. Being around someone like this can make it hard for you enjoy yourself and be positive. Sometimes it can be easy to confuse the symptoms of depression for negativity, so it is worth having a conversation with someone to determine if they need help getting through depression or if they are truly being toxic.



Passive aggression. These behaviors are a way that people express their discontent without having a conversation about their problems. This type of hostility is less obvious than anger and can be shown in a number of different ways. Some forms of passive aggression include snide comments, sabotaging the efforts of other people, and purposefully doing something or *not* doing something to make things inconvenient for someone or get them upset.



Self-centered. Toxic people care mostly about themselves. They don’t think about how their actions affect others and believe they are better than everyone else. Someone who is self-centered is focused on getting what they want and is unlikely to compromise or consider another person’s point of view.



Difficulty with anger management. Someone who has trouble managing their anger will make you feel like you are walking on egg shells every time you are around them. The littlest thing can trigger them into a fit of rage, and often nasty, hurtful things are said while they are in this mental state. There may be apologies the day after, but often they are insincere and the toxic person will repeat their angry, hurtful behaviors soon after.



Controlling. One of the most dangerous traits of a toxic person is controlling behavior. They may try to restrict you from contacting your friends or family, or limit resources like transportation or access to money to restrict your ability to interact with the world around you. If you are in a situation where someone is trying to restrict your movements or communication, this is domestic abuse and requires immediate action. Call 1-800-799-7233 or 1-800-799-7233 for TTY, or if you’re unable to speak on the phone, you can log onto thehotline.org or text “LOVEIS” to 22522.

FAST FACTS



An average of 80% of Americans have experienced emotional abuse.¹



Approximately ¾ of U.S. employees have, or have had a toxic boss according to a 2018 survey from Monster.com.²



Toxic friends are common. 84% of women and 75% of men report having a toxic friend at some point.³

IF YOU FEEL LIKE YOU ARE STRUGGLING WITH YOUR MENTAL HEALTH, VISIT [MHASCREENING.ORG](https://www.mhascreening.org) TO CHECK YOUR SYMPTOMS.



It’s free, confidential, and anonymous. Once you have your results, MHA will give you information and resources to help you start to feel better.

Sources

¹Carney, M.M., Barner, J.R. (2012). Prevalence of partner abuse: Rates of emotional abuse and control. *Partner Abuse*, 3(3), 286–335.
²<https://www.monster.com/career-advice/article/signs-not-cut-out-for-management>.
³<https://www.today.com/health/toxic-friends-8-10-people-endure-poisonous-pals-1C9413205>.



DETOXING YOUR LIFE

This worksheet will help you think through ways to create healthy boundaries so you can get rid of toxic influences in your life.

WHAT IS THE THING THAT YOU NEED TO STOP OR GET OUT OF YOUR LIFE?
 This can be a person, behavior or situation. Example: I want healthier relationships.

DESIRABLE OR HEALTHY
 Examples: I want someone who encourages me, someone who is patient.

UNCLEAR
 Examples: Having fights where we yell, talking over each other.

TOXIC OR UNACCEPTABLE
 Examples: Hitting each other, cussing at each other, name calling.

BUILDING CONFIDENCE

WHAT CAN YOU SAY TO GIVE YOURSELF A PEP TALK? Examples: I deserve to have healthy relationships. I choose me.

WHAT CAN YOU SAY TO THE TOXIC INFLUENCE TO SET BOUNDARIES? Examples: It is not ok for us to do this. I want us to get better and these are what is ok for you to do and what is absolutely not ok for you to do.

WHAT CAN YOU DO AND SAY TO REINFORCE YOUR BOUNDARIES OR CREATE HEALTHY DISTANCE?
 Examples: if you do (this), I'm going to leave. If you do (this) I'm going to walk out and take a break.

OWNING YOUR FEELINGS



It can be easy to get caught up in your emotions as you're feeling them. Most people don't think about what emotions they are dealing with, but taking the time to really identify what you're feeling can help you to better cope with challenging situations.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS



Allow yourself to feel. Sometimes there are societal pressures that encourage people to shut down their emotions, often expressed through statements like, "Big girls don't cry," or "Man up." These outdated ideas are harmful, not helpful. Everyone has emotions—they are part of the human experience—and you have every right to feel them, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, socio-economic status, race, political affiliation or religion.



Don't ignore how you're feeling. Most of us have heard the term "bottling up your feelings" before. When we try to push feelings aside without addressing them, they build strength and make us more likely to "explode" at some point in the future. It may not always be appropriate to process your emotions at the very moment you are feeling them, but try to do so as soon as you can.



Talk it out. Find someone you trust that you can talk to about how you're feeling. You may find that people are eager to share about similar experiences they've had or times that they have felt the way that you are feeling. This can be helpful, but if you're really only interested in having someone listen, it's okay to tell them that.



Build your emotional vocabulary. When asked about our feelings, most people will usually use words like bad, sad, mad, good, or fine. But at the root of "good, bad, sad, mad, or fine" are many words that better describe how we feel. Try building your emotional vocabulary by writing down as many "feeling" words as you can think of and think of a time that you felt that way.



Try journaling. Each night write down at least 3 feelings you had over the course of the day and what caused them. It doesn't need to be a "Dear Diary" kind of thing. Just a few sentences or bullet points to help you practice being comfortable with identifying and expressing your emotions.



Consider the strength of your feelings. By thinking about how intense your emotions are, you may realize that what you thought you were feeling at first could better be described by another word. For instance, sometimes a person might say they are stressed when what they are really experiencing is something less severe like annoyance, alternatively anger might really be a stronger, deeper feeling like betrayal.



See a mental health professional. If you are taking steps to be more in touch with your feelings, but are having trouble dealing with them, mental health providers like counselors and therapists have been trained to help. Some free or low cost options are also available. Your employer might have an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) that offers a limited number of free counseling sessions, and your Human Resources department can help you access this resource. If you don't have an EAP through work, the leaders of religious organizations like churches, synagogues and mosques often have experience with counseling.

Sources

¹<https://learnersdictionary.com/3000-words/topic/emotions-vocabulary-english>
²Kashdan, T. B., Barrett, L. F., McKnight, P. E. (2015). Unpacking Emotion Differentiation: Transforming Unpleasant Experience by Perceiving Distinctions in Negativity. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 24(1), 10–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721414550708>
³Brackett, M. A., Rivers, S. E., Reyes, M. R., & Salovey, P. (2012). Enhancing academic performance and social and emotional competence with the RULER feeling words curriculum. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 22, 218–224.

FAST FACTS



The English language has over 3,000 words for emotions.¹



People who are good at being specific about identifying and labeling their emotions are less likely to binge drink, be physically aggressive, or self-injure when distressed.²



When school-aged kids are taught about emotions for 20-30 minutes per week their social behavior and school performance improves.³

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It's free, confidential, and anonymous. Once you have your results, MHA will give you information and resources to help you start to feel better.



WHAT'S UNDERNEATH?

Taking the time to slow down and identify what we are really experiencing can help us feel better and can improve our communications and relationships with others.

Using the prompts below, think of a specific action (this could be something you did, or something someone else did) or event and fill in the blank to identify what's underneath. The feelings list on this page can help you build your mental collection of feelings. This type of activity takes practice, but once you start doing it you'll find it easier over time.

I FELT BAD WHEN _____
 (ACTION OR EVENT). BUT WHAT I WAS REALLY FEELING WAS _____, AND _____.

I FELT SAD WHEN _____
 (ACTION OR EVENT). BUT WHAT I WAS REALLY FEELING WAS _____, AND _____.

I FELT MAD WHEN _____
 (ACTION OR EVENT). BUT WHAT I WAS REALLY FEELING WAS _____, AND _____.

I FELT GOOD WHEN _____
 (ACTION OR EVENT). BUT WHAT I WAS REALLY FEELING WAS _____, AND _____.

I FELT HAPPY WHEN _____
 (ACTION OR EVENT). BUT WHAT I WAS REALLY FEELING WAS _____, AND _____.

POSITIVE FEELINGS

Admiration

Adoration
 Affection
 Appreciation
 Delight
 Fondness
 Pleasure
 Regard
 Amazement

Affectionate

Caring
 Friendly
 Loving
 Sympathetic
 Warm
 Doting
 Tender
 Attached
 Compassionate

Confident

Bold
 Courageous
 Positive
 Fearless
 Optimistic
 Encouraged
 Powerful
 Proud
 Trusting
 Secure
 Brave
 Empowered

Excited

Enthusiastic
 Delighted
 Amazed
 Passionate
 Aroused
 Alert
 Astonished
 Dazzled
 Energetic
 Awakened
 Eager
 Charged

Exhilarated

Blissful
 Ecstatic
 Elated
 Enthralled
 Exuberant
 Radiant
 Rapturous
 Thrilled

Gratitude

Thankful
 Grateful
 Moved
 Touched
 Appreciative
 Recognized
 Indebtedness

Included

Engaged
 Understood
 Appreciated
 Accepted
 Acknowledged
 Affirmed
 Recognized
 Welcomed
 Connected
 Supported
 Heard
 Respected
 Involved

Intrigued

Absorbed
 Fascinated
 Interested
 Charmed
 Entertained
 Captivated
 Engaged
 Engrossed
 Curious
 Surprised

Joyful

Cheerful
 Festive
 Lighthearted
 Upbeat
 Glad
 Merry
 Elated
 Delighted
 Jubilant
 Hopeful
 Tickled
 Pleased

Peaceful

Calm
 Quiet
 Trusting
 Fulfilled
 Steady
 Collected
 Composed
 Comfortable
 Centered
 Content
 Relieved
 Mellow
 Level
 Restful
 Still
 At ease
 Satisfied
 Relaxed
 Clear
 Reassured

Refreshed

Stimulated
 Replenished
 Exhilarated
 Reinvigorated
 Revived
 Enlivened
 Restored
 Liberated
 Lively
 Passionate
 Vibrant
 Rested

NEGATIVE FEELINGS

Afraid

Nervous
 Dread
 Frightened
 Cowardly
 Terrified
 Alarmed
 Panicked
 Suspicious
 Worried
 Apprehensive

Agitated

Bothered
 Uncomfortable
 Uneasy
 Frenzied
 Irritable
 Offended
 Disturbed
 Troubled
 Unsettled
 Unnerved
 Restless
 Upset

Angry

Furious
 Livid
 Irate
 Resentful
 Hateful
 Hostile
 Aggressive
 Worked up
 Provoked
 Outraged
 Defensive

Anxious

Shaky
 Distraught
 Edgy
 Fidgety
 Frazzled
 Irritable
 Jittery
 Overwhelmed
 Restless
 Preoccupied
 Flustered

Confusion

Lost
 Disoriented
 Puzzled
 Chaotic
 Uncertain
 Stuck
 Indecisive
 Foggy
 Dazed
 Baffled
 Flustered
 Perturbed
 Perplexed
 Hesitant
 Immobilized
 Ambivalent
 Torn

Disconnected

Lonely
 Isolated
 Bored
 Distant
 Removed
 Detached
 Separate
 Broken
 Aloof
 Numb
 Withdrawn
 Rejected
 Out-of-place
 Indifferent
 Misunderstood
 Abandoned
 Alienated

Disgust

Appalled
 Horrified
 Disturbed
 Repugnant
 Contempt
 Spiteful
 Animosity
 Hostile
 Bitter

Embarrassment

Awkward
 Self-conscious
 Silly
 Mortified
 Humiliated
 Flustered
 Chagrined
 Ashamed
 Put down
 Guilty
 Disgraced

Envy

Jealous
 Competitive
 Covetous
 Resentful
 Longing
 Insecure
 Inadequate
 Yearning

Helpless

Paralyzed
 Weak
 Defenseless
 Powerless
 Invalid
 Abandoned
 Alone
 Incapable
 Useless
 Inferior
 Vulnerable
 Empty
 Distressed

Pain

Remorseful
 Regretful
 Disappointed
 Guilty
 Grief
 Miserable
 Agony
 Anguish
 Bruised
 Crushed

Sadness

Heartbroken
 Disappointed
 Hopeless
 Regretful
 Depressed
 Pessimistic
 Melancholy
 Sorrowful
 Heavy-hearted
 Low
 Gloomy
 Miserable

Stress

Overwhelmed
 Frazzled
 Uneasy
 Cranky
 Distraught
 Dissatisfied
 Weighed down
 Overworked
 Anxious
 Shocked
 Frustrated

Tired

Bored
 Fatigued
 Exhausted
 Uninterested
 Worn out
 Fed up
 Drained
 Weary
 Burned out
 Lethargic
 Sleepy
 Depleted

Vulnerable

Insecure
 Exposed
 Unguarded
 Sensitive
 Unsafe
 Inferior
 Weak
 Judged
 Inadequate

The Link Between Racism and PTSD

By Monnica T. Williams, Ph.D., *Psychology Today* (Used with the author's permission)

A psychologist explains race-based stress and trauma in Black Americans.

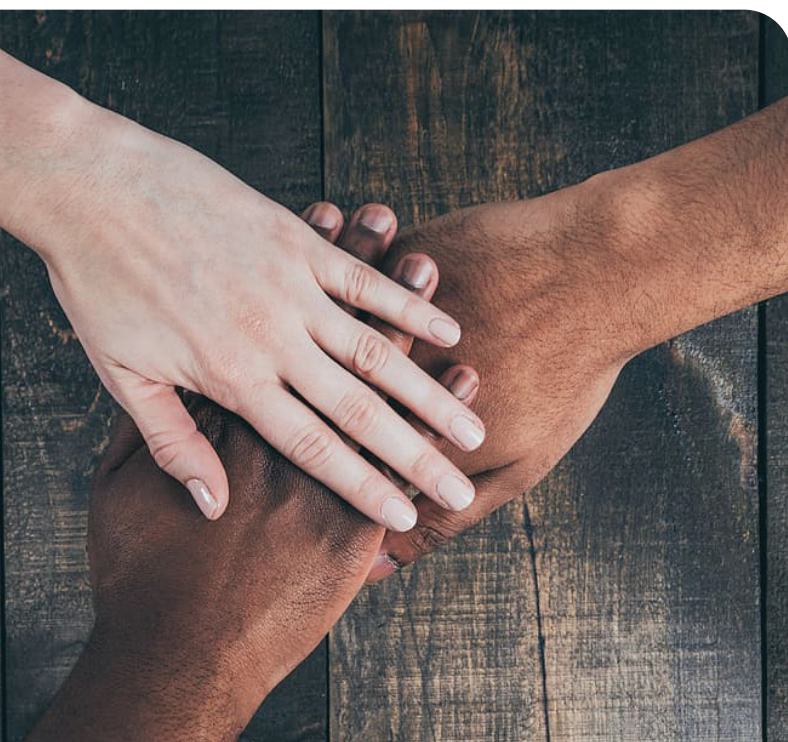
Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – the diagnosis conjures up images of hollow-eyed combat veterans or terrified rape victims, but new research indicates that racism can be just as devastating as gunfire or sexual assault. In a previous article I posed the question, Can Racism Cause PTSD? The answer is yes, and changes in the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) open the door for a better understanding of this phenomenon. Here I discuss the psychological research in this area, as well as clinical observations and how these relate to my own experiences as a person of color. Several people have asked me why I focus on African Americans, given the many similar experiences faced by other ethnic/racial groups, immigrants, sexual minorities, disabled people, and other stigmatized individuals. I want to state up front that the problems faced by those groups are real and deserve attention too, however in this article I am going to stick to what I know, the Black experience in America.

Racism-related experiences can range from frequent ambiguous “microaggressions” to blatant hate crimes and physical assault. Racial microaggressions are subtle, yet pervasive acts of racism; these can be brief remarks, vague insults, or even non-verbal exchanges, such as a scowl or refusal to sit next to a Black person on the subway. When experiencing microaggressions, the target loses vital mental resources trying to figure out the

intention of one committing the act. These events may happen frequently, making it difficult to mentally manage the sheer volume of racial stressors. The unpredictable and anxiety-provoking nature of the events, which may be dismissed by others, can lead to victims feeling as if they are “going crazy.” Chronic fear of these experiences may lead to constant vigilance or even paranoia, which over time may result in traumatization or contribute to PTSD when a more stressful event occurs later (Carter, 2007). In fact, one study of female veterans found that African Americans scored higher on measures of ideas of persecution and paranoia, which the authors attributed to an adaptive response to racism (C’de Baca, Castillo, & Qualls, 2012).

While most of us can understand why a violent hate crime could be traumatizing, the traumatizing role of microaggressions can be difficult to comprehend, especially among those who do not experience them. One study of racial discrimination and psychopathology across three U.S. ethnic minority groups found that African Americans experienced significantly more instances of discrimination than either Asian or Hispanic Americans (Chao, Asnaani, Hofmann, 2012). Non-Hispanic Whites experience the least discrimination (11% for Whites versus 81% for Blacks; Cokley, Hall-Clark, & Hicks, 2011). Furthermore, those African Americans who experienced the most racism were significantly more likely to experience symptoms of PTSD as well.

Make no mistake, Asian and Hispanic Americans receive their unfair share of racism too, and research shows that it may even be harder to manage for individuals in these groups. But each ethnic/racial group has its own package of negative stereotypes that impact the form of racism experienced, so it’s not surprising that PTSD prevalence differs by race and ethnicity. Findings from large-scale national studies indicate that, while African Americans have a lower risk for many anxiety disorders, they have a 9.1% prevalence rate for PTSD, compared to 6.8% in Whites (Himle et al, 2009). That means that almost one in ten Black people becomes traumatized, and I think these rates may actually be higher since diagnosticians are usually not considering the role of racism in causing trauma (Malcoun, Williams, & Bahojb-Nouri, 2015). Studies also show that African Americans with PTSD experience significantly more impairment due to trauma, indicating greater difficulty carrying out daily activities and increased barriers to receiving effective treatment.



Research has linked racism to a host of other problems, including serious psychological distress, physical health problems, depression, anxiety, binge drinking, and even disordered eating (Williams et al., 2014). A strong, positive African American identity can be a potential protective factor against symptoms of anxiety and depression, but this is not adequate protection when the discriminatory events are severe (Chae et al., 2011; Williams, Chapman, Wong, & Turkheimer, 2012).

I have spoken to African Americans all over the country about their experiences with race-based stress and trauma. One veteran in Colorado told me about how the bullets he faced in combat were nothing compared to the mistreatment he experienced at the hands of his fellow soldiers in arms. When he searched for treatment for his resulting mental health issues, the VA system could not find a qualified therapist to help him. I recently assessed a woman for whom the racial climate at work became so oppressive that she was no longer able to function at her job. She tearfully described the ongoing racial-harassment she experienced from her supervisor, while co-workers turned a blind eye. She carried a stack of documents to prove everything that had happened to her because she didn't think anyone would believe it. My heart breaks because I have heard her story in many forms, more than once (Williams et al., 2014).

It's important to understand that race-based stress and trauma extends beyond the direct behaviors of prejudiced individuals. We are surrounded by constant reminders that race-related danger can occur at anytime, anywhere, to anyone. We might see clips on the nightly news featuring unarmed African Americans being killed on the street, in a holding cell, or even in a church. Learning of these events brings up an array of painful racially-charged memories, and what has been termed "vicarious traumatization." Even if the specific tragic news item has never happened to us directly, we may have had parents or aunts who have had similar experiences, or we know people in our community who have, and their stories have been passed down. Over the centuries the Black community has developed a cultural knowledge of these sorts of horrific events, which then primes us for traumatization when we hear about yet another act of violence. Another unarmed Black man has been shot by police in our communities and nowhere feels safe.

Research shows that trauma can alter one's perceptions of overall safety in society. Black people with PTSD have been found to have lower expectations about the benevolence of the world than Whites. When comparing Black and White Americans, one study reported that African Americans held more negative perceptions of the

world, appearing more skeptical and mistrustful (Zoellner, Feeny, Fitzgibbons, Foa, 1999). Experiencing a traumatic event changed perceptions of the world in White victims from positive to negative, yet the perceptions of Black victims were not impacted by traumatic experiences. My take on this is that they are already traumatized by life in America. Most of us with dark skin know the world is not safe.

Once sensitized through ongoing racism, routine slights may take an increasingly greater toll. Microaggressions, such as being followed by security guards in a department store, or seeing a White woman clutching her purse in an elevator when a Black man enters, is just another trigger for racial stress. Social messages and stereotypes may blame the victim, and tell us that Blacks need to stop "dressing like thugs," "get off welfare," and assimilate into White culture to gain acceptance. But these experiences can happen to any Black person of any social status. Sometimes higher status Black people experience more discrimination because they threaten the social order and thus draw increased hate from others (e.g., Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). I've experienced this myself on plenty of occasions. For example once when I was working as a psychological intern in a metropolitan hospital, I was followed by security guards to my car after work. Apparently, a co-worker was frightened by



me simply because I was black. It did not matter that I was a qualified medical professional engaged in patient care and with no history of violence. I remember feeling helpless, angry, and confused. I went over the experience in my mind repeatedly, and tried to figure out who had made the call and why. Victims often feel powerless to stop these experiences because the discrimination is so persistent. Those who are exposed to this type of racial oppression may turn their frustration inward, resulting in depression and disability, or respond outwardly through aggression or violence.

I often wonder how people can continue to remain resilient in the face of ongoing, undeserved discrimination. Within the Black community, positive coping with racism may involve faith, forgiveness, humor, and optimism. These cultural values have allowed African Americans to persevere for centuries even under the most oppressive conditions. One area we are currently studying in my research lab is how African Americans can proactively cope with racism.

We are also developing treatments for race-based stress and trauma to enable those who are suffering to move beyond their painful experiences and become stronger, so they can re-engage in larger society. But patching up injured victims of racism one-by-one only goes so far. I don't think it is reasonable to expect that we can "fix" people to enable them to manage constant, ongoing acts of prejudice with a smile, and ask them to be perpetually polite, productive, and forgiving. What we really need is a large-scale shift in our social consciousness to understand the toll this takes on the psyche of victims so that even small acts of racism become unacceptable. We need those who witness racism to speak out and victims to be believed.

Looking for more resources on how racism impacts mental health? Please visit the Racism & Mental Health section on EAP's Resources webpage.

For many more resources on the impact of racial disparities on our community, visit FEI Behavioral Health (user name Madison)

Please visit the EAP's COVID-19 webpage for a variety of resources that you and your family members may find helpful. Resources are being updated often!

*Thanks for reading,
we hope you found the information useful!*

You can reach any of us by calling the EAP Office at (608) 266-6561

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