

Understanding racial trauma

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Hi there, and thanks for joining this recorded webinar on "Understanding Racial Trauma". My name is Erica Hanlon, I'm a licensed professional counselor and life coach.

Objectives

And it's my hope that you will walk away from the end of this webinar understanding what racial trauma is, what it looks like, what are the symptoms. If you are not somebody who experiences racial trauma, then it's my hope that you will get some tips to be a better ally, to people who experienced racial trauma. And finally, we'll give you some resources to help address racial trauma.

What is racial trauma?

So what is racial trauma? So racial trauma is also known as race-based traumatic stress. And a lot of us have heard of post-traumatic stress disorder and racial trauma is very similar. It is trauma that comes about, because of the experience of racism and discrimination. It has a very similar, emotional impact. It causes stress, it causes emotional pain, but it is specifically racial trauma, when it is caused by racism and discrimination.

Signs of racial trauma¹

So, as I mentioned before, racial trauma looks very similar to post traumatic stress disorder, but racial trauma is a little bit different again because of the cause. And we'll talk a little bit more about that in this presentation today. But signs and symptoms of racial trauma look like increased sensitivity to threat. So clinically we sometimes refer to this as hypervigilant. So you're always sort of looking around for any threat or sign of racism, of discrimination, of prejudice. And so, that increased vigilance and suspicion is a big symptom of racial trauma.

There's also often a sense of a fore shortened future that your future is going to be shorter. It's hard to kind of think about the future long term. It's very much kind of crisis management in the moment, short term thinking. Also racial trauma and, you know, the lack of understanding around it often then leads to unhealthy coping responses. Maybe that looks like aggression. Maybe it looks like substance misuse. Maybe it looks like numbing out, look things like food, alcohol, drugs, shopping, those kinds of things. Often we don't know how to

cope with our feelings, and so we turn to unhealthy coping responses as a way to sort of numb out our emotional pain.

Discrimination can be a type of chronic stress²

So you may have heard the term chronic stress. It's that stress that just never goes away. And chronic stress is particularly difficult to cope with because our bodies are designed for, to respond to a threat and then recover after the threat has passed. The problem with discrimination is that it is a type of chronic stress because the threat never goes away. You know, our experience with racism and the people who experience it is the worst kind of chronic stress. Because not only is it chronic, it never goes away. We live in a racist society. So it's chronic, but it's also unpredictable.

When might you run in to a racist person? When might you experience discrimination? So it's unpredictable and it's outside of your control. So yes, it's chronic stress, the stress never goes away because of the environment and the society that we live in that supports racism and discrimination, but also, it's outside of your control, you never know when it's going to happen. And so you're on constant alert.

Trying to prevent racist events may make it worse²

So for a lot of people, the way that they cope with discrimination and racism is that they try to think ahead, anticipate the future and try to prevent experiencing racism and discrimination. Which sounds like that would make sense. That that makes sense to us. The problem is that it actually reinforces the trauma and it reinforces the stress and adds to the stress, because you're trying to prepare for possible insults. And when you think ahead, and you imagine things happening, you experience the feeling of it happening, even if it hasn't happened yet.

Just imagining something, our brains can't tell the difference between imagining something and actually experiencing something. So imagining a racist event and trying to prepare for it, your body will still respond as if the racist event actually happened. So trying to prepare for it creates additional stress.

Also a lot of people try to prevent racist events by paying careful attention to how they present themselves. How are they speaking? How do they look? And this is also a kind of way of experiencing hypervigilance. And you can imagine that overthinking, what are you saying? What are you doing? How are you presenting? How will people think about you? Is a lot of stress, that creates a lot of stress.

Also avoiding certain people, certain places, certain situation, trying to avoid all of those things and creates a lot of mental. Stress, that's a lot of mental energy that could be used for other things. So again, it sort of doubles down on the stress. So that prevention, all those prevention efforts, well, yes, it makes sense to try and do that, to protect yourself, it be making your stress levels, it can exacerbate racial trauma.

“The causes of racial trauma are everywhere”

I really like this quote from Zawn Villines, "The causes of racial trauma are everywhere". It's everywhere. And I've read a book once that said that, racism and discrimination in our culture is a lot like just breathing smog. We breathe it in all the time and we don't even notice it.

Causes of racial trauma³

So, let's talk more about the causes of racial trauma, because some people may be resistant to this idea that racial trauma and the causes of it are everywhere. So it's important to note that people can develop racial trauma, even if they were not the direct target, even if they themselves did not experienced it. So how might they experience racial trauma? What might cause it?

So exposure to racial or ethnic stereotypes. So for example, you might just be watching the news and some talking head on the news is referring to black people as thugs, they're thugs. That is a stereotype. Fears about personal safety is the cause of racial trauma. So if you're going into a neighborhood where you don't feel safe, where you're worried that you might be a target that can create the experience of racial trauma.

Also if you've witnessed somebody he else receiving abuse where maybe they've been the target of racism or discrimination, just simply witnessing that, even if it's not in person, maybe you see it on television or in a movie, you will still be impacted by that, if it is, you know, a member of your group. Racist abuse of loved ones can be especially triggering. So, even if again, you didn't witness it, but maybe you hear the stories about it that can create racial trauma.

Also, obviously more obviously direct exposure to racist abuse or discrimination often that's what we would think of, because that's often what it looks like for post-traumatic stress disorder. We think, well, you had to be the direct target, not necessarily. And then finally others not taking the experiences of racism seriously. So if you're asking for help, you're telling somebody about your experiences and they are not understanding if they're downplaying it, that can also exacerbate racial trauma.

Individual racism... Systemic racism

So let's just kind of drill down a little bit more specifically into the category of individual racism versus systemic racism. So a lot of us are much more familiar with this idea of individual racism. It's one person being racist. It's the one person's racist thoughts, their beliefs, their actions. So, how that might look is that maybe they are physically attacking somebody based on the color of their skin. They are engaging in verbal attacks; they're using racial slurs. Maybe they are the property of somebody, spray painting, breaking windows, those kinds of things. Dressing up as another person's culture or ethnicity. It seems like every Halloween we see this, right? Or people go to football games and they are, you know, dressed as you know, native Americans, because the name of the football team is a native American team. So that can also be a racist behavior. Unfair treatment based on somebody, the color of somebody's skin.

And also this one, we tend to see a lot more recently. I don't think that means that it's happening more frequently, but now it's being filmed and being called out, which is calling the police on a person who is black indigenous, or a person of color also referred to as BIPOC, without any justification. The person's not doing anything wrong and they call the police on them. So those are examples of individual racism. Now, systemic racism is much more insidious, it's much harder to identify, because it's something that we're used to. It's something that's already happening, we're surrounded by all the time. It's a normal practice within society or organizations. So this looks like racist arrest, policing, sentencing, you know, having a greater police presence in neighborhoods where there's a higher number of people of color.

Also there is evidence that clearly substantiates that white people tend to get less punitive sentences if they engage in the same crime as somebody who is a person of color. Also racist hiring practices, there's lots of evidence that shows that even just simply having a white sounding name means that you're more likely to get the job. Unequal pay, white people get paid more than people who are black, indigenous or a person of color. Lack of cultural competency in mental health and medical professionals. This is big. A lot of therapists, psychologists and doctors are not trained to be culturally competent. And so people who are black indigenous or people of color are less likely to get the kind of medical care that they need.

Also, we know the educational systems aren't equal. Neighborhoods and schools that are predominantly white, tend to get better resources. There are often barriers to voting. It is harder for people of color to be able to engage in politics and even to simply vote. And then we have beauty standards that are based on whiteness everywhere, right? You know, even just look at Disney films, how many Disney films have princesses and you know, stars who

are white versus people of color. Now, Disney is doing better, but there's still a lot of room for growth. So we're constantly surrounded by racism, everywhere and discrimination everywhere. And a lot of times we don't even notice it. It's like breathing the air for us.

What is a microaggression?⁴

So what is a microaggression? You may have heard this term before. And so it's important to dive into it a little bit more. A microaggression is a subtle everyday instance of racism or homophobia or sexism.

Now, these are so subtle that people who commit them, they not even think that they did anything wrong. You think they're just living life, but it's almost like a dog whistle for the person who is the target. And the person who is the target, the person who was on the receiving end of a microaggression, it still has a significant impact on them, even though the person who's engaging in it feels like it's nothing.

So here's some examples. So commenting on how well somebody speaks English, right? So, if somebody is Latino or Latina and you're commenting on how well they speak English, or if somebody is Asian and commenting on how well they speak English. You would not say that to a white person, right? You wouldn't say that to a white person probably.

Also assuming that a person who is Latinx or Asian, isn't American born. So asking where they're from, you know, you probably wouldn't do that again to a white person. And then presuming that a black person is dangerous or violent. So, you see a black person, what is the first thought that you have? Are you going to turn around or cross the street or grab your purse a little bit closer? So presuming that is a microaggression.

Direct traumatic stressors

So let's also discuss direct traumatic stressors. So all direct experiences of living in a racist society or the impact of living in a racist society or receiving racist attacks from individuals count as direct traumatic stressors. So these might include being heavily policed, again, having a heavy police presence in your neighborhood, being pulled over when really you haven't done anything wrong, also counts as being heavily policed. And there are probably more examples there as well. Also facing barriers to home ownership due to biased policies.

So this is something that has been going on a really long time. And it continues even today. Actually I was just reading an article other day about a family where the wife is black, the husband is white and they are seeking to either sell their home or refinance it and so they had to get an appraisal of their home. And the appraisal came in over a hundred thousand

dollars lower than what they anticipated based on what other houses in the neighborhood were selling for that were in similar shape.

So they requested another appraisal. And before the second appraisal, they removed any signs that a person of color lived there, family photos, the wife was not home at the time of the appraisal. And the appraisal came in more than a hundred thousand dollars higher than the original appraisal, just simply by removing any signs that a person of color lived there. So, that is an example of a direct traumatic stressor. Also experiencing physical or verbal attacks based on the color of your skin or experiencing micro aggressions, those all qualify.

Vicarious traumatic stressors

Let's also discuss vicarious traumatic stressors. So vicarious trauma and the stress that comes from vicarious trauma is calming when somebody is not the direct target of the racism, but they are an indirect target. So these can be exposure to discrimination and racism. And a lot of us think, well, it doesn't really count, or it's not as harmful, just because you've witnessed it or you've heard about it. No vicarious trauma and the vicarious traumatic stressors can be just as harmful to a person of color as mental health as experiencing that racism directly.

So this may include viewing videos of police killings, of black indigenous, or people of color. This may also include a witnessing a violent event or a physical assault of a person of color, or being exposed to high rates of societal homicide, suicide, and injury in one's community. So take, for example, we know that many native Americans children are exposed to a high rate of homicide and suicide in their communities.

Intergenerational traumatic stress

So something, a lot of people don't understand is that traumatic stress can be transferred from one generation to the next. This is sometimes referred to as intergenerational traumatic stress. So a lot of white people, for example, don't understand why slavery is still such a big deal to black communities, you know, a hundred plus years later. And it is because of intergenerational traumatic stress.

Slavery continues to be a source of traumatic stress for black people. It also makes them more vulnerable to mental health disorders. We also know that for Jewish people and especially those who were descendants of Holocaust survivors, they have an increased vulnerability to mental health issues and native Americans share a historical trauma from massacres, forced removal from their tribal lands and more. And native Americans continue to experience mental health issues due to these impacts.

Intergenerational traumatic stress⁶

How exactly does that happen? How do you experience traumatic stress and inherit traumatic stress from your relatives and your ancestors? So what we know is that the health consequences of racism and discrimination can actually be passed from one generation to the next, through the body's biological memory of harmful experiences. This actually happens on a biological cellular level.

So when a mother is pregnant, if she is experiencing stress, it actually changes the child's biology. And these changes can also impact the mother's health as well as the child health. So traumatic stress absolutely can be passed down from one generation to the next.

Responding to trauma

So now that we've discussed the signs and symptoms of racial trauma, as well as the causes, let's discuss how to respond to racial trauma. Now with any kind of trauma, there is no one way or one right way to respond. Everybody will respond differently to trauma. But if you yourself are experiencing some of the symptoms we talked about before, then it's important to be aware of those and not just try to push them down.

So pay attention to your thoughts, pay attention to your feelings. And instead of trying to suppress them with things like drugs or alcohol, or getting into fights or overeating, or over shopping or gambling, or you name it. Instead of trying to push it away or just push through with positive thinking, it's important to accept and allow for those thoughts and feelings. A lot of times we try to push those feelings away, we try and push those thoughts away, and it can only make it worse. It doesn't make those thoughts and feelings go away, when we try to resist them.

Talking about trauma⁷

One of the most helpful things you can do to process trauma is to talk about it. Talking about your traumatic experience, either with a professional or with somebody who is trained or is just simply supportive and helpful, actually changes the structure of your brain. It changes the way that you have held those memories in your brain so that they are less distressing for you. So you might find that that is very helpful for you to talk about your experiences. It can help normalize it, that it's not just all in your head. It can help validate it and you can feel better. So consider who you might talk to you about your experience. Maybe it's a friend, maybe it's a family member, maybe it's a clergy person. It needs to be someone you trust, somebody with whom you feelsafe. And some people do find that talking openly about racism can actually help prevent internalizing that racism, which means for a lot of people,

you're breathing in all of these racist messages all day long, and it changes the way that you think about yourself and that's considered internalizing racism and believing it about yourself. Like believing that you can't make money because of the color of your skin, or you can't be wealthy, or you can't get a good job or all of those kinds of things. So, talking about it, being validated, normalizing your experiences can help prevent that from happening.

Coping with racial trauma

So when it comes to coping with racial trauma, at least in the workplace, we do recommend that workplaces hire consultants to help address racism, discrimination and challenge the status quo, around what's going on within the workplace. How might racism be showing up within the workplace? A lot of times bias is unconscious, and also to start a dialogue. Now, we don't recommend that you take this on yourself, if you're a person of color, because this may be burdensome to you, and it may also lead to additional frustration to have to educate other people about your own racial trauma, and what it means to be a person of color.

We also recommend that you connect with others for shared wisdom and collective strength, and if possible, as much as possible, avoid people who dismiss racism, who dismiss racial trauma, who are not willing to be open and listen and learn about what racism looks like, and how it might impact you.

Coping with racial trauma

So, in addition to those tips, when it comes to coping with racial trauma, if you can try to reduce the intake of negative information. So, for example, you may, if you're very upset and feeling very stressed following, another police killing, maybe you take a break from social media, because a lot of times we want to sort of seek out that negative information and replay it over and over and over, but that may not be helping you. It probably is not helping you.

So, especially in times of stress, you want to reduce the intake of negative information to help care for yourself. And engage in activities that feel empowering. Maybe you joined some activist groups, you donate money, do things that feel empowering for you and seek to promote change. And as much as possible, try to identify what your specific racial trauma triggers are.

And again, if you are experiencing a time of stress, try to avoid them because they will have a more negative impact on you when you're experiencing stress. And of course, we really recommend that while it's great to talk to friends and family and clergy people, and people

who are supportive, that if you can speak with a trauma informed therapist, that that can be an amazing resource.

Tips for allies

So perhaps you were watching this webinar and you have not experienced this, maybe you are a white person. So what can you do? How can you support your loved ones who are black indigenous and people of color? And how can you address things like systemic racism?

So the first thing is to really educate yourself, learn about systems of oppression and how it has benefited your life. So for a lot of us who were white, we've never been taught how to talk about racism. It was sort of like, hush, hush don't talk about that. So when racism comes up, we don't know how to talk about it. We're afraid of saying the wrong thing and we shut down and that only makes it worse. So instead, it's really important that we take on the responsibility of educating ourselves about racism and discrimination in our culture and how it supports those things. It's not the responsibility of our friends and family who are black, indigenous and people of color to educate us, we need to do the work ourselves.

So learn about systems of oppression, learn about how it's benefited your life. Notice who is the center of attention? Is it another just white person? Is it a white person who is taking the microphone, when really, we want to elevate the voices of people of color? Notice who is at the center of power, who is making decisions. And as I mentioned before, note that that it's not the job of people of color to educate you about race and privilege, you need to do your own work.

As I mentioned before, listened to an amplify voices of people of color, hand them the microphone. Practice humility, you don't need to be an expert. You don't have to have all the answers. You don't have to know everything and be prepared to feel uncomfortable. Be prepared to feel uncomfortable, think about yourself. You may reflect on some moments and have, some cringe-worthy moments.

I know that I have had a lot of them, but my ability to be open to the fact that I was wrong, I said the wrong thing and have somebody correct me has been very, very helpful. And these days it is not enough to just not be racist. It's really important to try to aim, to be anti-racist. How can you help fight against racism?

What not to say to a person of color

So, as I mentioned, a lot of white people are never taught about how to talk about racism or how to talk about racist events. So here's what not to say. If somebody is telling you about

their experiences, you don't want to minimize it or dismiss it, like it's no big deal. You don't want to say things like, well, maybe he didn't mean it that way, or she does the same thing to me or all lives matter. We don't want say that, that is dismissing somebody's experience. Because when somebody says black lives matter, they're not saying black lives matter more than white lives. There is an implicit and silent to black lives matter too, because they haven't mattered for so long.

You also don't want to make it about you. You don't want to say things like I understand, or I know what you're going through, or get defensive and say things like, well, I'm not racist. And you don't want to ask the person to comfort you. I'm so upset about what happened, I can't believe it and get really upset and expect them to take care of you. You also don't want to use your friendships to prove you're not racist.

This is a big one, a lot of people get defensive and they start saying, well, some of my best friends are black. This is tokenizing your black friends, your friends who are people of color. Don't do that, don't say that. And don't, as I mentioned before, ask your friends to educate you about racism. When you do that, it's like asking them to relive their own pain and their own trauma.

Where allies can get information

So if allies are wondering where they can get information, if they aren't asking their friends who are BIPOC, black indigenous people of color, then here are some resources you may want to explore. This kind of maybe your starters kit. And this is by no means a comprehensive list of resources. There are a lot of amazing resources out there, but these are some that are particularly popular right now.

So the first is a book entitled, "So You Want to Talk About Race by Ijeoma Oluo." The second is another book, "An African American and Latinx History of the United States by Paul Ortiz". Also, Dolly Chugh wrote a book entitled, "The Person You Mean to Be: How Good People Fight Bias".

And there's a new book out entitled, "How to Be an Antiracist by Ibram X. Kendi". And the final book on this list is "Biased: Uncovering the Hidden Prejudice that Shapes What We See, Think and Do by Jennifer L. Eberhardt". And if maybe you don't want to read a book and you want to explore some podcasts, there's one entitled code-switch that is hosted by National Public Radio, NPR. And it is really all fearless conversations about race. So, that might be one worth checking out.

Therapist resources

Now, if you are a black indigenous or person of color, and you are looking for a therapist or a counselor or a mental health resource, as we mentioned, there may be some challenges as not all mental health professionals are aware of racial trauma and what it means to experience racial trauma. So here are some directories and resources you may want to explore.

So there are some directories for Latinx people. The first one is therapyforlatinx.com. There is also another directory at latinxtherapy.com. And if you're looking for resources as a black person, there is Therapy for Black Girls, and that website is providers.therapyforblackgirls.com.

There's also a website, Therapy for Black Men, which is that therapyforblackmen.org. And there's a website hosted by the Association of Black Psychologists, which that website is www.abpsi.org/find-psychologists. There are also some directories and resources for people who are Asian. The first one is the Asian Mental Health Collective. And that website is asianmhc.org.

There's also the South Asian Mental Health Initiative Network. And that website is samhin.org. And the final one is Therapy for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. And that website is therapyforasians.com. And finally, if you are an indigenous person and you are looking for mental health services, you may want to explore the Indian Health Service Directory. And that website, is ihs.gov.

Thank you for attending

So that concludes the webinar for understanding racial trauma. It's important to remember that you are not alone, we are here for you 24/7, 365 days a year. Contact us anytime, take care.

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