



RACIAL TRAUMA

Racial trauma, or race-based traumatic stress (RBTS), refers to the mental and emotional injury caused by encounters with racial bias and ethnic discrimination, racism, and hate crimes.¹ Any individual that has experienced an emotionally painful, sudden, and uncontrollable racist encounter is at risk of suffering from a race-based traumatic stress injury.² In the U.S., Black, Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) are most vulnerable due to living under a system of white supremacy.

Experiences of race-based discrimination can have detrimental psychological impacts on individuals and their wider communities. In some individuals, prolonged incidents of racism can lead to symptoms like those experienced with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).² This can look like depression, anger, recurring thoughts of the event, physical reactions (e.g. headaches, chest pains, insomnia), hypervigilance, low-self-esteem, and mentally distancing from the traumatic events.³ Some or all of these symptoms may be present in someone with RBTS and symptoms can look different across different cultural groups. It is important to note that unlike PTSD, RBTS is **not** considered a mental health disorder. RBTS is a mental **injury** that can occur as the result of living within a racist system or experiencing events of racism.³

Racialized trauma can come directly from other people or can be experienced within a wider system. It can come as the result of a direct experience where racism is enacted on you, vicariously - such as where you see videos of other people facing racism - and/or transmitted intergenerationally.¹ *Trigger Warning: The following includes discussions of abuse, assault, and violence.*

EXAMPLES OF INDIVIDUAL RACISM

Following the COVID-19 outbreak in the U.S., there were nearly 1,500 reported incidents of anti-Asian racism in just one month. Reports included incidents of physical and verbal attacks as well as reports of anti-Asian discrimination in private businesses.⁴

In 2018, 38 percent of Latinx people were verbally attacked for speaking Spanish, were told to “go back to their countries,” called a racial slur, and/or treated unfairly by others.⁵

Over the course of one year, Twitter saw 4.2 million anti-Semitic tweets in just the English language alone. These tweets included anti-Semitic stereotypes, promotion of anti-Semitic personality or media, symbols, slurs, or anti-Semitic conspiracy theories including Holocaust denial.⁶

EXAMPLES OF SYSTEMIC RACISM

Black people make up 12 percent of the country’s population but make up around 33 percent of the total prison population.⁷ This overrepresentation reflects racist arrests and policing as well as racist sentencing practices in the criminal justice system.

Previous and current policies of racial displacement, exclusion, and segregation have left all BIPOC less likely than whites to own their homes regardless of level of education, income, location, marital status, and age.⁸

The erasure of Asian Pacific Islanders (APIs) in the “Asian or Pacific Islander” category by U.S. Census data severely restricts access to opportunities in these communities by concealing the unique barriers faced by APIs that are not faced by East or South Asian communities.⁹

Historical occupation segregation has made Black people less likely than Whites to hold jobs that offer retirement savings which are prioritized by the U.S. tax code. This helps create a persistent wealth gap between White and Black communities where the median savings of Black people are on average just 21.4 percent of the median savings of White people.¹⁰

Lack of cultural competency in therapy training, financial incentives, and geographical isolation have created barriers in providing appropriate mental health resources in Native American communities. Rates of suicide in Native communities are 3.5x higher than racial/ethnic groups with the lowest rates of suicide.¹¹

TYPES OF TRAUMATIC STRESSORS

DIRECT TRAUMATIC STRESSORS

Direct traumatic stressors include all direct traumatic impacts of living within a society of structural racism or being on the receiving end of individual racist attacks. A person experiencing a direct traumatic stressor may be heavily policed, or they may face barriers to home ownership due to inequitable policies. Additionally, a person experiencing a direct traumatic stressor may be the victim of individual physical and verbal attacks or may face other microaggressions.

VICARIOUS TRAUMATIC STRESSORS

Vicarious traumatic stressors are the indirect traumatic impacts of living with systemic racism and individual racist actions. Vicarious traumatic stressors can have an equally detrimental impact on BIPOC's mental health as direct traumatic stressors.

For example, viewing videos of brutal police killings of Black people, such as the video associated with the murder of George Floyd, can cause traumatic stress reactions in the people who view them - especially in Black people.¹²

Of Latinx youth that immigrate to the U.S., two-thirds report experiencing one traumatic event with the most common traumatic event reported during and post migration being witnessing a violent event or physical assault.¹³

Many Native American children are vicariously traumatized by the high rates of societal homicide, suicide, and unintentional injury experienced in these communities.¹⁴

TRANSMITTED STRESSORS

Transmitted traumatic stressors refer to the traumatic stressors that are transferred from one generation to the next. These stressors can come from historically racist sources or may be personal traumas passed down through families and communities.

The chattel enslavement of Africans in the U.S. and other countries continues to serve as a source of traumatic stress for Black people today. In fact, this sustained collective trauma makes Black people highly vulnerable to developing mental health disorders.¹⁵

The descendants of Holocaust survivors display an increased vulnerability to developing psychological disturbances in addition to stressors related to Holocaust loss. This vulnerability is in direct relationship to the negative life experience of the previous generation.¹⁶

Historical trauma shared by Native Americans including boarding schools, massacres and forced violent removal from their tribal lands represents a severe communal loss and source of traumatic stress. Native Americans today continue to experience symptoms of depression, substance dependence, diabetes, and unemployment due to the psychological impact of the trauma.¹⁷

HOW CAN YOU PREVENT RBTS?

Often the most immediate recourse for healing RBTS is through self-care. Taking steps to proactively care for your mind, body, and spiritual self can serve as a protective measure and an act of resistance against racialized traumatic stressors. Find tools at www.mhanational.org/racial-trauma.

HOW DO YOU KNOW YOU HAVE RBTS?

If you identify as a BIPOC and have experienced racism, you may be able to self-assess for many of the symptoms of RBTS. Formal diagnosis of RBTS requires assessment by a qualified mental health professional.

If you believe you may be suffering from race-based traumatic stress injury, it is important to seek therapy from a multicultural or racial trauma-informed therapist. These therapists work to create an open, culturally affirming, empowered space for you to heal from racialized trauma in all its various forms. Find a list of directories for specialized providers at: www.mhanational.org/racial-trauma.

HOW CAN YOU HELP YOUR COMMUNITY HEAL FROM RBTS?

A part of self-care for many individuals includes relational care because healing from racial trauma does not happen in a vacuum. There are restorative tools and resources available that you can bring to your communities.

Find tools and resources at www.mhanational.org/racial-trauma.

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