

Strategies for helping employees cope with and heal from racial trauma



Racism in all of its overt and subtle forms continues to threaten the health and well-being of the nearly 42% of Americans who are people of color. Chances are, you or someone you care about has experienced racism in its many systemic and interpersonal forms, including:

- Built-in systemic biases that create inequality and inequities in access to education, health care, criminal justice, financial resources, among other sectors
- Influential people and entities that promote misconceptions, negative stereotypes and bias-infused legislation
- People in one's public and private lives who sometimes intentionally or inadvertently say or do things that make a person feel devalued and dehumanized
- Terrible events, like hate crimes, police shootings, and more, that one witnesses in person or sees in the news

Exposure to racism — whether firsthand or secondhand — can lead to mental and emotional injuries, also called racial trauma or race-based traumatic stress (RBTS).

Especially when left unchecked, RBTS can lead to anxiety, depression, chronic stress, high-blood pressure, substance use and symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), among other conditions. Long-term, heightened stress and anxiety also can compromise a person's immune and digestive systems, increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, and lead to mental and physical exhaustion — burnout.

As a manager, you can take a special role in helping employees of all backgrounds feel welcomed and valued. You also can play a pivotal role in helping Black, indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) gain the support and resources they may need to cope with RBTS.

Eight ways to get started

1. Promote a growth mindset

Whatever your personal background is, there is always more to learn about people who are different from you. As a manager, you have the power to influence others and lead by example:

- Take the time to educate yourself about the rich histories and cultures of races and heritages different from your own. Also learn about their struggles so you can better understand the experiences and perspectives of your peers and employees.
- Encourage employees to do the same, whether formally by making enrichment part of performance and training goals, or informally by sharing the books you're reading, shows you're watching and the like.

2. Address your biases

Our brains create categories to make sense of the world. But the values we place on different categories are learned — and can be unlearned with self-awareness and continued effort. So, it's helpful to understand your own inherent biases. For example, ask yourself if you:

- See things as simpler if you know less about them?
- Prefer those most like you?
- Favor information that supports your opinions and existing beliefs?
- Hold and/or act on assumptions based only on appearances and first impressions?
- Gravitate toward things and ideas you already know you like and are interested in?

These are all indicators of potential biases. Self-examine how these might manifest in your interactions with others and how you can help yourself correct course. Also consider working with a professional leadership coach or therapist to do the same.

3. Set the tone

Words are tricky. It can be difficult to find or know the right words, especially because their meanings sometimes change over time, or mean different things to different people or in various contexts. But, understanding that we might not always get it exactly right, it's still important to try — and to encourage your employees to try as well.

- **Use person-first language.** Choose words with sensitivity, ensuring that the individuality and humanity of people are respected. Example: Avoid describing people with words generally used to describe "things" — e.g., use "multiracial," not "mixed."
- **Follow the person's preference.** If you're unsure, ask. Example: A person might self-reference as Black, African American, Caribbean American or something specific to their ancestral place of origin, such as Jamaican or Somali, etc.
- **Avoid using language that attaches judgment or shame,** or forces others to make assumptions. Example: Saying a neighborhood is "sketchy" implies its residents lack the standards of manners and ethics. Instead, cite the neighborhood, district or area.

4. Combat microaggressions

There are many nuances to microaggressions, but in simple terms, these are everyday verbal, nonverbal and environmental slights, snubs or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that demean people by suggesting they don't belong, or by invalidating their experiences. For example, complimenting a coworker of Thai descent for speaking "good English" sends the message that the co-worker is not a "true" American.

Even with the best intentions, we sometimes make mistakes or accidentally hurt another person's feelings. So, it's best to be prepared to apologize, and to also be kind to yourself. Everyone makes mistakes — the important part is learning from them and committing to doing better. Likewise, if you overhear someone use a microaggression, help them learn from it by gently correcting them and explaining what transpired.

The key here is maintaining a sense of cultural humility, a willingness to hear the perspective of others, to learn, and to be intentional about respecting and valuing one self and others.

5. Create a safe space for communication.

Listen respectfully with an open mind and invite open conversation — and encourage your employees to do the same.

Keep in mind, unless you share the person's heritage and experience, you cannot draw parallels without likely causing offense and/or hurt. For example, most Americans have not lived through a mass genocide, such as the Holocaust, Khmer Rouge or Darfur. Similarly, unless you are a Black man, you do not understand the anxiety, frustration, anger or fear one might feel being pulled over by the police.

6. Create safe spaces and forums

From day-to-day life to historic moments and tragic events, people of color are processing the personal and overarching effects of racism continuously. It's important to create a culture in which it's OK to take breaks to decompress, destress and brace oneself to cope with potential trauma. For example:

- Bring in racial trauma experts to guide discussions and help raise awareness of RTBS and the conditions it can lead to.
- Consult with experts and your employees to identify helpful outlets, such as 15-minute breaks, a designated office space to sit quietly and meditate, or whatever else offers people space and comfort.
- Adjust schedules in anticipation of major events, such as Election Day, or in the aftermath of a national tragedy like the George Floyd murder or the Capitol insurrection.

7. Commit to diversity and inclusion

As workplaces promote inclusion and diversity initiatives, it's important that employees see your commitment. Through your actions and words, help employees understand that inclusion is about each person feeling valued and connected, and in a diverse workplace, the rich mix of differences creates better solutions and results.

Across your organization, help foster discussion, promote acceptance and encourage enduring mutual respect.

For example:

- Add diversity and inclusion training to employees' continuing education and performance goals.
- Encourage cultural enrichment activities, such as through team-building events and other formats.
- Invite expert speakers and create forums for open discussion about racism, inequity and inequality to increase awareness and understanding.

Note: At these events, take pains not to put employees of color on the spot to present or speak — let it be a personal and independent decision to step forward or sit back. And if you are a person of color, give yourself permission to say "no" if you are asked to take a primary role. This kind of center stage pressure can exacerbate RBTS.

8. Commit to racial justice

Put words and intent into action — take or follow the lead in compelling your company to commit to racial justice.

For example:

- Take a stand in support of equality and equity as far as hiring processes, promotions, pay, benefits, leave, etc.
- Give your employees a safe place to be and speak up.
- Openly support social and racial justice causes — through actions, not just words.
- Look for opportunities to show support in your local communities and more broadly. For example: Talk to your leadership about possible opportunities to make public statements as a company, donate to important civil rights causes, stand up for your employees' voting rights, and the like.

We will not and cannot cure RBTS overnight, but we can all work together to make progress in preventing it.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/janicegassam/2020/10/26/how-to-navigate-the-racial-trauma-your-employees-may-be-experiencing/?sh=54f953a67568>
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