

## Strategies for coping with and healing from racial trauma



If you're one of the nearly 42% of Americans who identify as a person of color, chances are you or someone you care about has experienced racism in its many forms. These include:

- 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 your public and private lives who sometimes intentionally or inadvertently say or do things that make you feel devalued and dehumanized
- Terrible events, like hate crimes, police shootings and more, that you witness in person or see in the news

It's a lot to take in, and difficult for anyone to cope with, much less overcome, without help.

Racism in all of its overt and subtle forms continues to threaten the health and well-being of Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC). In fact, 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 abuse and symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Long-term, heightened stress and anxiety also can compromise your immune and digestive systems, increase your risk of heart attack and stroke, and lead to mental and physical exhaustion.

If this sounds familiar to you, you can take steps to help protect yourself against the mentally, emotionally and physically draining effects of living with discrimination. There also are professional resources available to support you. Below are some self-help strategies for coping with and healing from race-based trauma.

**Reach out to others for support.** Sometimes when people are in pain, they isolate themselves. But social support from people you trust can be an important resource. Connect with empathetic and understanding family and friends who you will listen and understand what you're going through.

**Join a peer group.** Group discussion can help you realize you are not alone in your experiences, reactions and emotions. Community support group meetings led by appropriately culturally competent and trained professionals can be especially helpful if your personal support systems are limited. Consider connecting through digital apps and phone if you're one of few people like you in your community.

**Channel your emotions.** Whether you're feeling sad, powerless, angry or any other intense emotion, it can be helpful to direct your feelings into something that helps you create meaningful change, however small. For example, join an activist organization, help get out the vote, volunteer as a youth mentor, or something else that interests you.

**Communicate your experience.** Another way to channel your emotion is to express what you are feeling in whatever ways feel comfortable to you. For example, tap into creative outlets like the visual or performance arts or writing, or something else that enables you to proactively and healthfully express yourself and your perspective.

**Take a break.** Find a safe place or way to at least momentarily get away from the swirl of headlines and acute awareness that racism is real. Maybe put on headphones and close your eyes while you listen to your favorite music. Cook a delicious meal that reminds you of good times. Go for a walk or birdwatching. Play a sport you love, or try a new exercise class like Pilates or kickboxing. Whatever it is, give yourself permission to give yourself a break.

Also consider using relaxation techniques, like breathing exercises and practicing mindfulness, such as yoga, journaling or meditation, to help relieve stress.

**Mind your health.** Taking care of yourself is an important part of coping with racism, getting through times of overwhelming stress, and steeling yourself for the challenges to come. Eating a well-balanced diet, getting enough sleep and exercising regularly can help strengthen your body and reduce feelings of anxiety or depression.

**Nurture hope.** Even in the most harrowing times, find reasons to be optimistic. Think about positive experiences you've had to remember good things do and will happen. Acknowledge even small signs of change.

**Avoid harmful outlets.** Using alcohol and substances to numb what you're feeling detracts from and delays active coping. Seek resources and outlets to help you actively manage your feelings and stress in a healthful way.

### Get help

Seek out a psychologist who has a working understanding of racism, is comfortable working with people of the same or a different race, and who is knowledgeable and trained in the clinical effects of racial trauma. A culturally competent provider will understand the role that cultural differences play in the diagnosis of a condition, and can incorporate cultural needs and differences into your care.

- [NAMI offers tips on finding a culturally competent provider](#)
- [Mental Health America has directory of culturally competent providers listed on this page](#)

<https://www.mhanational.org/racial-trauma>  
<https://mhanational.org/racism-and-mental-health>  
<https://www.mhanational.org/infographic-bipoc-and-lgbtq-mental-health>  
<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/racism-and-mental-health.htm>  
<https://www.apa.org/topics/racism-bias-discrimination>  
<https://npin.cdc.gov/pages/cultural-competence>  
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<https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Identity-and-Cultural-Dimensions>  
<https://www.aha.org/aharet-guides/2013-06-18-becoming-culturally-competent-health-care-organization>  
<https://hbr.org/2020/06/how-organizations-can-support-the-mental-health-of-black-employees>  
<https://www.epi.org/publication/black-workers-covid/>

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