

Resources to Help Navigate Race-Related Trauma, Structural Injustice, and Allyship

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Structural Injustice: Coping with Race-Related Trauma and Turning to Your Roots for a Solution

“Misery won’t touch you gentle. It always leaves its thumbprints on you; sometimes it leaves them for others to see, sometimes for nobody but you to know of.”-Edwidge Danticat (The Farming of Bones)

The recent police violence, intercommunal aggression, and innumerable loss of Black lives continue to cast light on systemic oppression and lack of justice for Black and other minority identified individuals. The pain, anguish, and rage you see on social media and news outlets may bring up past memories of racism, micro aggressions, and trauma related to both. The onslaught of images of violence, particularly amidst a pandemic, can bring up feelings of helplessness, lack of control, uncertainty, fear, anger, worry for family and community members, and disappointment and frustration with the political and legal system.

While past life experiences may be more activated than ever, some of us are marinating in narratives that lead us to continue extending our voices for civil rights. Combating the present while past trauma is amplified can lead us in many directions. Some of us engage in advocacy, others distance and isolate in an attempt to shield ourselves. As you explore and grow in your understanding of your story as a Black person or a person of color, please know that every feeling is valid. Anger. Pain. Exhaustion. Trepidation. Malaise. Disconnection. Each one of these adjectives speak to the wounds (physical and emotional) that may currently be festering. Unfortunately, years or a lifetime of being torn down because of your skin tone and culture, cannot be healed quickly.

The body remembers and holds its trauma, and when our trauma is activated, it is shared and experienced by our mind, body and soul. This can result in feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, fearful, and worried. In our body, we may experience headaches, increased heart rate, difficulty breathing, and unexplained aches and pains. These experiences may be activated by our own, vicarious, as well as generational and historical pain. When the world spends substantial time telling you that you are not enough by minimizing your identities and talents, imposing dominant values around communication and language on you, putting you in a closed box, and denying your opportunities, it is easy to believe that message. Fighting oppressive messages is tiresome and can feel defeating.

What systemic oppression chooses not to notice is your resiliency, namely, your capacity to recover and cope with recurrent pain, barriers, lack of resources, and unequal opportunities. You are strong and resilient because despite holding worry about financial survival and psychological and physical safety of you and your loved ones, you continue to perform your daily life tasks. Resiliency is an unrecognized muscle that gets stronger and stronger with use. Your muscle is more toned than the unjust system would like you to believe. Before you continue reading ways of coping with race related pain, we want to refer you back to your powerful muscle (resiliency).

A loud, oppressive system can make it hard for us to hear and notice our own gifts and strengths. Residing in this critical system can make it hard to practice self-compassion. As you wade through this unjust system, consider being gentle and kind to yourself. This judgmental system may have taught you to judge yourself. Consider fighting those oppressive voices by using kind words and understanding with yourself, instead.

Oppressive systems attempt to obliterate our cultural roots and encourage focus on dominant culture values and practices. Though living in the time of the pandemic reduces options for cultural practices related to coping, we encourage you to look within your culture for self-care through prayers, meditation, music, dance, art, poetry, and literature. Consider reaching out to your community. Surround yourself with voices that believe in you and avoid those that inflict pain through their ignorance.

It is not your responsibility to educate and fix. You also do not need to keep diving into media outlets if it deepens your anguish. Consider, where you can, setting boundaries with people and media.

Along with leaning into your resiliency and towards your cultural roots, consider trusting your pain and human need for support. Sometimes when pain is layered and continuous, turning to someone for support and guidance to feel more empowered and in control of your journey can be helpful. Although you have the strong muscle of resilience and adequate internal resources, professional assistance such as counseling and psychotherapy are a resource to support you in your journey.

Privilege and Allyship

The words “privilege” and “white privilege” have been central in discourse related to systemic oppression and racial injustice. When we are called to reflect on privilege or white privilege in particular, it is helpful to remember that it is not an indictment of our personhood, but rather, a commentary on the fact that our society is organized in such a way where certain groups or identities are given access to advantages beyond what’s available to others. If you--based on your race, sexual orientation, ability status, etc. -- belong in one of those groups, you benefit simply by belonging to that group. A major benefit of privilege is that it’s invisible for the holder; you rarely reflect on its benefits while others who don’t have access to it painfully and clearly see it for what it is. Like Peggy Macintosh explained, those with racial privilege benefit by not having to consider such things as: whether we will be followed in a store, whether our local beauty store will have products that are unique to our skin/hair, or whether we can open up a

magazine and have faces reflected back to us that look like ours. More recent events in our country highlight that those of us with white privilege likely don't have to worry about being killed while out for jog, sleeping in our beds at night, or confronting police. It gets complicated from here—all of us hold multiple identities, some of which hold privilege and some are marginalized. The intersection of these identities is important to be aware of and consider while growing in our awareness of how to be better agents of change.

Doing the Work – Increasing Awareness of Privilege

If we commit to change, we must face the uncomfortable truth of how privilege and systemic injustice perpetuates the disadvantages and real threats to livelihood Black people and other marginalized folks endure.

Confronting privilege that comes with whiteness (and/or other social identities that hold privileged status such as being straight, able-bodied, Christian, cisgender, etc.) starts with accepting that you may benefit from privilege given to you based on social identities you occupy, and getting curious about the ways you may benefit from these “invisible” benefits. A good place to start is to take stock of all the narratives you are hearing currently about the experience of Black people in America as their voices rise to decry systemic racism – do these narratives make you feel uncomfortable? Are you pulled to offer counter points or advice? Do you decry racist behavior while maintaining a stance of neutrality (e.g., “I’m not racist”)? Do you have the ability to disengage completely and not focus on the topic at all? All these responses may point to the possibility that your lived experience is not only different from others but allows you to go on in life in such a way that’s not possible for Black or brown people.

How to Be an Ally: Social activist and author Bell Hooks wrote: “privilege is not in and of itself bad; what matters is what we do with privilege. We have to share our resources and take direction about how to use our privilege in ways that empower those who lack it.”

Educate yourself: As you commit to confronting privilege and ways you may benefit from it, invest in learning about systemic racism, White supremacy, and how the system continues to operate today. This work is hard, at times painful, but so important. Seek out authors representing diverse identities. While it is paramount to listen to what they have to say, don't ask your Black and brown friends or family members to teach you or find you resources.

Be active: Allies are called to stand up and speak up, even when scared or anxious, because their privilege often shields them from worse repercussions that a marginalized person would otherwise face. Invite diverse voices to conversations you are a part of. Support Black authors, activists, and poets by consuming and sharing their work. Join causes that align with social justice values.

Stay humble: Actively working towards an anti-racist stance is an ongoing process, one in which we fumble, make mistakes, and say the wrong things. Remember this is a journey, and one in which we have opportunity to learn from mistakes. Commit to listening to feedback if something you say/do misses the mark; accept, apologize and repair; give yourself grace as you continue to learn and integrate things you learn, and remember that while you may feel

pain/discomfort in these encounters, embracing the discomfort and engaging in these conversations is doing the work.

Difficult Conversations about Privilege, Racial Injustice and Allyship

Conversations about privilege and racial injustice are difficult in part because they activate our defenses. These defenses can range from outward attack to avoidance. In the spirit of humbly growing into stronger allies, consider these tips when offered reactions or feedback from others:

Take a breath: If you have been given difficult feedback, taking a few moments to center yourself and choose intentional language goes a long way to minimize common defenses and allows you to speak authentically.

Listen: Listening is a difficult skill; most of us listen to someone while simultaneously formulating a response in our head. Listen with an effort to understand the emotional experience of the person across from you, striving to remember that even if what they're telling you isn't familiar, it doesn't mean it's not true.

Acknowledge: If you've made a misstep, acknowledge how this made the person feel and the impact it created (avoid starting the acknowledgement with "I didn't INTEND"), and commit to doing better.

Process: It's valid and normal for allies (particularly white allies) to confront complicated feelings when addressing racial injustice, including feelings of guilt, discomfort, or anxiety. These feelings should be processed and addressed, and it's more productive when done privately or with other individuals who wouldn't be burdened by holding your emotions while trying to tend to their pain at the same time.

Responding to Personal and Microaggressive Racism

"Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

-James Baldwin (As Much Truth As One Can Bear, New York Times)

If you witness someone say or do something racist, you have a choice to make about how to respond. That choice is likely to be shaped by factors such as your social identity (are you a white ally calling out racism or a person of color experiencing it?), as well as your relationship to the person/institution committing the racist act (is this a family member whose relationship is important to preserve), and the scope of the act (racial microaggression vs witnessing police brutality on your street).

Racial microaggressions are defined by Derald Wing Sue and colleagues as "everyday slights, insults, putdowns, invalidations, and offensive behaviors that people of color experience in daily interactions with generally well-intentioned White Americans who may be unaware that they have engaged in racially demeaning ways toward target groups" ([click here for some examples](#)). Some general things to keep in mind while responding to racism on this more personal level include:

Consider your privilege. White people addressing racism and racist microaggressions are less likely to experience the kind of negative consequences black or people of color would. Speak up, say anything – it will have more impact than silence. It can be as simple as “that doesn’t sit well with me, can you clarify what you mean?”

Consider the audience: if you are addressing a microaggression committed by a close friend or family member whom you respect, consider that the relationship could weather – and be strengthened by – feedback about concerns you experience. Ask for clarification and communicate back how their words sound. “Your comment about the protests conveys a lack of empathy for people who are hurting, which isn’t usually like you– is that what you mean to say?”

Communicating with words: Try to use “I” or “me” statements to share how microaggressive comments or actions make you feel. One helpful emotion to use is empathy; “If I were in ____’s shoes, I might feel ____ about what you’ve just said.” If you are feeling angry, remember that it is justified and can be used in a persuasive way to help others see their impact.

Communicating with more than words: If you don’t know what to do or can’t say something because lack of safety/power, are you in a position to communicate in other ways? Consider how your posture and facial expressions can send a message; you could also say something like, “It makes me uncomfortable to hear this from you, I’m going to excuse myself.”

Set Boundaries: Sometimes others just won’t listen; they might become so defensive that they continue to invalidate, ignore, and dismiss the concerns you share. In these cases, setting a boundary can be best to protect yourself to communicate disapproval. This may be easier said than done especially for our Black and brown community members, given the pervasiveness of racist messages and acts. This boundary will also likely look different based on context and relationship.

See color. Many people say, “I don’t see color,” in the often well-intended desire for equal rights and treatment. But when we take a colorblind approach, we cannot see patterns of disproportionate impact in our systems. If we don’t see it, we can’t intervene. On a more personal level, when we do not acknowledge race, we ignore the background that informs a person’s worldview and experience and assume it to be the white default. Some people fear that they are being racist if they notice someone else’s race, but ignoring it actually makes you more likely to hurt them.

Listen to and elevate melanated voices. Realize that your experience is not the only experience. Expand what you read to include diverse authors, follow people who are different from you on social media, and share their perspectives with others. Elevate individuals of color in your classes, group projects, organizations, and workplaces.

Where do you have influence? Author Ijeoma Oluo has said, “You have to realize that racism is built into the bones of pretty much every organization, every structure in society, which means you have to build anti-racism into the bones if you want to fix it.” What are your “organizations?” Whether it’s your family, your classroom, your org, UIC, the city of Chicago, etc., examine your spheres of influence and where you can start conversations about how to make things better.

Civic Engagement. Explore the policies and politics of your local police department, aldermen, prosecutors, etc. Contact your alderman, mayor, representative, senator, governor, etc. Sign petitions. Vote, especially in local elections.

Intervene. While some systemic racism is best approached from a prevention standpoint, you will likely catch something in the moment that does not sit right with you. Say something and suggest alternatives for change.

Appreciate, don't appropriate. Cultural appropriation happens when we take something from another culture and use it in a way that was never intended by the original culture.

Resources

Resources for Black Individuals and Communities

Self-Care

[Black Lives Matter: Meditations](#)

[Emotionally Restorative Self-Care for People of Color](#)

[Liberate Meditation App \(by and for people of color\)](#)

[Radical Self-Care in the Face of Mounting Racial Stress Talking about Race: Self-Care](#)

[Tips for Self-Care: When Police Brutality Has You Questioning Humanity and Social Media is Enough](#)

Coping Strategies

[Black Lives Matter: Healing Action Toolkit](#)

[Common Coping Strategies](#)

[Discrimination: What It Is and How To Cope](#)

[Family Care, Community Care and Self-Care](#)

[Tool Kit: Healing in the Face of Cultural Trauma](#)

[Filling Our Cups: 4 Ways People of Color Can Foster Mental Health and Practice Restorative Healing](#)

[Grief is a Direct Impact of Racism: Eight Ways to Support Yourself](#)

[Healing Justice is How We Can Sustain Black Lives Proactively Coping with Racism](#)

[Racial Trauma is Real](#)

[Racism Recovery Steps](#)

[Toolkit for Healing in the Face of Cultural Trauma \(English and Spanish\)](#)

Supporting Each Other

[Supporting Kids of Color in the Wake of Racialized Violence Tips for Supporting Each Other](#)

[We Heal Too](#)

Tools for Confronting Racism

[Black Lives Matter: Conflict Resolution Toolkit](#)

[Black Lives Matter: Trayvon Taught Me Toolkit \(in Spanish\)](#) [Disarming Racial Microaggressions: Microintervention Strategies for Targets, White Allies, and Bystanders](#)

Antiracism Resources

Tools for Confronting Racism

[75 Things White People Can Do for Racial Justice](#)

[Black Lives Matter: A Toolkit for Trayvon](#)

[Confronting Racism](#)

[Disarming Racial Microaggressions: Microintervention Strategies for Targets, White Allies, and Bystanders](#)

[Race, Power, and Policy: Dismantling Structural Racism](#) [Racism Interruptions \(A Guide for What to Say\)](#)

[Ten Ways to Fight Hate: A Community Response Guide](#)

Exercises

[Expressive Writing Prompts to Use if You've Been Accused of White Fragility, Spiritual Bypassing, or White Privilege](#)
[Harvard Implicit Bias Test](#)

[Racism Scale](#)

Learning Opportunities

[Antiracism Learning Opportunities through Enrich Chicago Detour-Spotting for White Antiracists](#)

[How Well-Intentioned White Families Can Perpetuate Racism Talking About Race: Being Antiracist](#)

[White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#)

Teaching about Racism

[Antiracist Toolkit for Teachers and Researchers](#)

[How to Talk to Kids about Race: Books and Resources](#) [Resources for Educators Focused on Antiracist Learning and Teaching](#)

[The Urgent Need for Antiracist Education](#)

[Toolkit for Teaching about Racism](#)

[Toolkit for Teaching about Racism](#)

Books to Read

On the Experience of Racism

[A People's History of the United States](#) by Howard Zinn

[Citizen: An American Lyric](#) by Claudia Rankine

[Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower](#) by Dr. Brittney Cooper

[I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness](#) by Austin Channing Brown

[The Bridge Called My Back, Writings by Radical Women of Color](#) edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa

[My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies](#) by Resmaa Menakem

[The Racial Healing Handbook](#) by Annellese A. Singh

[Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in The Cafeteria?](#) By Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum

On Antiracism

[How to Be an Antiracist](#) by Dr. Ibram X. Kendi

[Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor](#) by Layla Saad

[So You Want to Talk about Race](#) by Ijeoma Oluo

[The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#) by Michelle Alexander

[White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism](#) by Dr. Robin DiAngelo

Organizations to Support

[Black Emotional and Mental Health Collective](#)

[Black Girls Smiles](#)

[Black Lives Matter - Chicago](#)

[Black Women's Blueprint](#)

[Chicago Regional Organizing for Antiracism](#)

[Color of Change](#)

[Enrich Chicago](#)

[Equal Justice Initiative](#)

[National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Showing Up for Racial Justice](#)

[Sister Song](#)

[The Audre Lorde Project](#)

[The Antiracist Research and Policy Center](#)

[The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights](#)

[The Loveland Foundation](#)

[The Nina Pop and the Tony McDade Mental Health Recovery Fund for Black Trans People](#)

[The Foundation for Black Women's Wellness](#)