

SELF CARE FOR PEOPLE OF COLOR AFTER PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA

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I love Black people. I love us so much. I have so many friends who work in the anti-racist space. I worry for our wellbeing when we are inundated with racism. Continuing to engage in confronting racism in the online space can mean taking a risk with your brain and psychological wellbeing. All of the interactions and conversations in the online space, can be received as micro-aggressions and race-based traumas. Though the work of creating a better racial digital landscape is all of our responsibility and intentional conversations matter, we must be mindful to take good care of ourselves. We must be mindful to create space, establish relaxation routines, and recharge with people who give us life while engaging in these discussions and doing this very important work.

When people of color are exposed to repetitive acts of racism (**racism has been shown to be processed in our brains as trauma**) a kind of **post traumatic stress syndrome** can develop. Race-based trauma can come in several forms:

Witnessing ethnoviolence or discrimination of another person, historical or personal memory of racism, institutional racism, micro aggressions, and the constant threat of racial discrimination (Helms et al., 2012).

This syndrome can be a response to any traumatic event and can be marked by an acute state of fear, anxiety, and hopelessness. If the acute trauma does not reach resolve, or is not diffused within a reasonable timeframe, it can develop into **post traumatic stress disorder**. If you are a person of color or an ally you need to evaluate yourself and your loved ones for signs of emotional and psychological trauma. **If you already have a history or mental illness, you need to be extra diligent.**



If you or your loved one are showing signs of trauma you need to take active steps to care for your psychological well-being (and your brain). To make what happens in your brain plain lets consider what happens to a muscle:

Say 200 people lined up to press their thumb firmly into your bicep. After the 20th person you may feel a little sore, but your body isn't sending signals that you should stop. Each time the next person presses their thumb into your muscle you might flex to resist the pressure. By the 50th person your muscle is communicating signs of pain and fatigue, but there are still people in line to press their thumb into your bicep. You realize that what you are about to experience will hurt.

[In anticipation of the pain, your body signals to activate the limbic system. The limbic system is responsible for the functions that inform our survival instincts and reflexes. It also regulates the autonomic nervous system and informs your stress and relaxation. Your amygdala lights up and begins attaching emotional meaning to these sensations (the thumb in your arm). It signals other parts of the brain that there is danger (habitual pain) and sends outputs to the hypothalamus for activation of your sympathetic nervous system.]

You don't run, because you can't. So you endure 50 more and then 100 more thumbs being pressed into your bicep. When it is over, a bruise has formed. If you don't stop, rest that bicep, provide nutrients that promote healing the wounded part, your adrenal systems goes into overdrive. Your sympathetic nervous system requires a level of signals that communicate that you are safe (no one is going to stick their thumb in your bicep now) in order to achieve homeostasis . If homeostasis isn't achieved, the message of fight or flight gets stuck and other systems attempt to compensate and increase their neuro-response to keep up with your

fear signals. Essential your brain will continue to work as if it needs to respond to thumbs being pressed into your bicep even when no one is threatened to repeat the act. The thumb pressing has now been assigned in your brain as a trauma memory. This memory can be triggered (thus activating your fight or flight into a hyper-elevated response) by anything that your brain has filed as related to the incident (schema).

(Of course environment and other biological factors impact this process as well, but for the point of the illustration I've parsed some of the systems down.)

So to bring this illustration back to race-based trauma, your brain is the bicep and the neuro-response translates to your emotional and psychological well-being. Race-based trauma literally leaves bruised spots on your brain. By continuing to enter online conversations, as important as you warrant them to be, you are allowing the bruise to be pressed on over and over. You are harming yourself if you do not step away and heal. **These conversations are impacting your emotional and psychological well-being.**

If you are still with me, I've provided a way to respond to the trauma in order to help discharge the fight-or-flight response and create homeostasis for your brain.

STEPS TO SELF CARE AFTER EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA

Race-based trauma can create symptoms and experiences much like PTSD.

Repeated race-based trauma puts your emotional, psychological, and physical well-being at risk

Mindful Isolation

Disconnect from triggering interactions or other situations that might elicit the fight-or-flight response

Discharge Energy

Find ways to exert physical energy. go for a brisk walk or run. Find (safe) ways to discharge intense anger that includes physical movement.

Ask For Help

If you find yourself unable to cope, find a trauma support group or therapist to assist you. You matter.

Community

Connect with people who you've identified as your empathetic and open support. Process your feelings with them.

Well-Being

- Feed yourself well
- Get good rest
- Avoid toxins
- Breath deep

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TAKE CARE OF YOU