

# Understanding the Trauma of Racism

Mental health professionals understand the psychological impact of systematic racism. Psychological trauma can be linked to racism, which can be traumatic in both overt and subtle ways. Trauma that results from acts of racism is called racial trauma. These acts can be obvious ones, such as workplace harassment and racial profiling, or subtle ones such as offhanded comments or non-verbal exchanges. Regardless of the source or severity of the acts, research shows that racial trauma can be related to physical health and psychological issues, including depression, anxiety, substance use and eating disorders.

## Impact of Current Events

Given the recent violent attacks on people of color, people in general, and especially people of color, are experiencing increased levels of trauma and stress. These times are marked by a sense of horror, helplessness, and even the threat of serious injury or death. The resulting trauma affects not only survivors, rescue workers and the friends and relatives of victims, but also everyone who has seen the events firsthand or on television.

## What are common responses to trauma?

Emotional responses to traumatic events vary. People may exhibit feelings of fear, grief and depression. Physical and behavioral responses include nausea, dizziness and changes in appetite and sleep pattern, as well as withdrawal from daily activities. Responses to trauma can last for weeks to months before people start to feel normal again. Most people report feeling better within three months after a traumatic event. If the problems become worse or last longer than one month after the event, the person may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

## What is post-traumatic stress disorder?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an intense physical and emotional response to thoughts and reminders of the event that last after the traumatic event. The symptoms of PTSD fall into three broad types: reliving, avoidance and increased arousal.

- Signs of reliving include flashbacks, nightmares and extreme emotional and physical reactions to reminders of the event. Emotional reactions can include feeling guilty, extreme fear of harm and the numbing of emotions. Physical reactions can include uncontrollable shaking, chills, heart palpitations and tension headaches.
- Signs of avoidance include staying away from activities, places, thoughts or feelings related to the trauma or feeling estranged from others.
- Signs of arousal include being overly alert or easily startled, difficulty sleeping, irritability, outbursts of anger and lack of concentration.

Other symptoms include panic attacks, depression, suicidal thoughts and feelings, drug abuse, feelings of being isolated and not being able to complete daily tasks.

## Ways to Cope with Tragedy

There are many things you can do to cope with traumatic events:

- Understand that your feelings are normal.
- Keep to your daily routine.
- Take the time to resolve day-to-day conflicts so they do not add to your stress.
- Do not shy away from situations, people and places that remind you of the trauma.
- Find ways to relax and be kind to yourself.
- Turn to family, friends and clergy for support. Talk about your experiences and feelings with them.
- Participate in activities that help you relax.
- Recognize that you cannot control everything.
- Recognize the need for trained help, and call a local mental health center.

## When should you contact a doctor about PTSD?

About half of those with PTSD recover within three months without treatment. Sometimes symptoms do not go away or they last for more than three months. This may happen because of the severity of the event, direct exposure to the traumatic event, seriousness of the threat to life, the number of times an event happened, a history of past trauma, and psychological problems before the event.

You may need to consider seeking professional help if your symptoms affect your relationship with your family and friends, or affect your job. If you suspect that you or someone you know has PTSD, talk with a health care provider or call your local mental health clinic.

### Resources:

- OK2Talk: <https://ok2talk.org/>
- You Are Not Alone: <https://notalone.nami.org/>

## Here when you need us.

Call:

TTY: 800.697.0353

Online: [guidanceresources.com](https://guidanceresources.com)

App: GuidanceNow<sup>SM</sup>

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