

## **Coping with Racial-Based Stress During COVID-19** by [Tramaine Presley, Psy.D., LMHC](#)

The world as a whole is being forced to cope with the recent changes due to COVID-19. Unemployment rates are rising, schools are being restructured, businesses are shut down, travel plans are canceled/postponed, and social distancing is in order. Not only are all of us forced to adjust to these unexpected changes, but African-Americans throughout the country are feeling the weight of the recent deaths of George Floyd, Tony McDade, Breonna Taylor, Dreasjon “Sean” Reed, and Ahmad Arbery. As seen in various social media posts and protests on city streets, many are struggling to cope with these tragic deaths during this unprecedented time. Amid a pandemic where racial disparities exist for African-Americans, members of this community are finding themselves stressed and traumatized.

Race-based stress or racial trauma refers to the reactions to dangerous events and real or perceived experiences of racial discrimination (Comas-Diaz, et al., 2019). In situations where race-based trauma is experienced, African-Americans are experiencing compounded stress. Not only are African-Americans experiencing the effects of vicarious racism, witnessing acts of discrimination toward others, but the effects of transgenerational racial trauma, stress associated with the legacy of racism, and collective trauma, the collective perceptions of discrimination toward one’s racial group.

When an individual becomes a recipient of such trauma, the following symptoms are likely to occur:

- **Hypervigilance:** Recipients of racial trauma often experience heightened alertness to their surroundings, causing one to feel suspicious and overly cautious. Such individuals likely feel distrustful of social institutions, such as the legal and justice system, leaving such persons to trust only those within their social network.
- **Heightened sensitivity:** After experiencing race-based stress, individuals may find themselves feeling sensitive to disrespect and messages that convey inferiority and invisibility. As a result, such persons may find themselves responding defensively or engaging in avoidance behavior, such as minimal contact with their oppressor.
- **Changes in emotional functioning:** Individuals who experience racial trauma may experience a change in their emotional functioning. It is not uncommon for individuals to feel an array of emotions, leaving one overwhelmed and confused. Often individuals experience feelings of anger due to the longstanding injustice and strong need to control their physical and social environment. Some may feel hopeless and helpless, which can lead to depression. In addition, many experience a great deal of fear and anxiety. This could manifest in excessive worry about themselves, their family, and the African-American community at large.
- **Physiological symptoms:** Symptoms of some mental health conditions such as trauma tend to manifest in physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, and other body ailments. This is often seen in those from various ethnic minority groups.
- **Change in adaptive functioning:** When issues of mental health arise, adaptive functioning (the skills we exert to function from day-to-day) are impacted. This may include personal hygiene, social functioning (e.g., maintaining relationships, obeying rules/laws) and occupational/academic functioning (e.g., manage workload effectively, meeting work standards, attendance/punctuality).
- **Changes in sleep and eating patterns:** Too much or too little eating and sleeping, compared to your daily pattern, are often indicators that something is bothering you.

Stress is the body's physiological and cognitive response to threatening or challenging situations. Stress is normal and is a natural human response. The stress one experiences on a daily basis is likely to be more tolerable due to effective ways of coping. However, exposure to aversive experiences for long periods of time creates a breakdown in coping. Due to the prevalence in racism at various systemic levels, the African-American community as a collective is experiencing toxic stress that affects their mental and physical health.

The array of emotions experienced in response to race-based stress may interfere with a person's ability to cope effectively, which can further develop into a mental health condition. Maladaptive coping strategies that do not provide adequate adjustment to the problem (e.g., aggression, substance use/abuse, trolling on social media) often leave a person in greater distress. With that being said, it is imperative that members of the African-American community prioritize their mental health by engaging in routine self-care practices and employ effective coping strategies.

The following are coping strategies to consider:

- **Set appropriate boundaries:** It is important to know your limits in order to set appropriate boundaries. Be aware when "too much" becomes too much to manage mentally and emotionally as this may serve as a need to set a boundary. This can include limiting your time with media or disengaging in discussions regarding recent racial events with friends and family.
- **Connect yourself to a supportive community:** Historically, remaining connected to family, friends and faith communities are ways in which African-Americans have become resilient and resourceful during harsh times. Take time throughout your week to call/video chat with a friend or family member. Become involved in various social media groups or reach out to your local faith community. Also, join a grassroots organization dedicated to uplifting the African-American community and combatting systematic racism. Being proactive about such issues can help minimize one from being reactive.
- **Self-care:** It is important that you are practicing self-care routinely. After being inundated with images and messages that you do not matter, remind yourself that you do matter by engaging in self-care practices. Examples include engaging in affirming readings and podcasts, art activities, consuming a nutritious diet, exercising, meditation, journaling, listening to music, taking a warm bath, lighting candles, going to sleep early, unplugging from social media, picking up a new hobby, and scheduling time for fun.
- **Find the joy:** With all of the negativity, African-Americans have to be intentional about finding enjoyment. During this time, do not forget to laugh and have fun. That may mean tuning into something humorous, dancing out to your favorite tune, playing a board game or engaging in video games that allow you to connect with others.

If you are concerned about your mental/emotional health, consult with your primary care physician about resources available in your community. Also, look within your insurance network for providers covered by your plan. Most importantly, talk to those in your support system for support and guidance on taking the next steps to getting help.

### Additional Resources

American Psychological Association. *African Americans have limited access to mental and behavioral health care*. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/advocacy/civil-rights/diversity/african-american-health>.

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