

## The Effects of Racism on Mental Health

With the horrific deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, “Black people are experiencing unprecedented trauma,” said Ebony White, an assistant clinical professor of counseling and family therapy at Drexel University. “When we see these injustices happen over and over again, we are seeing ourselves. Black men see themselves in George Floyd. Black mothers see their sons in Tamir Rice.”

Daniel H. Gillison, Jr., is the CEO of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). He made the following statement:

“The effect of racism and racial trauma on mental health is real and cannot be ignored.”

The disparity in access to mental health care in communities of color cannot be ignored. The inequality and lack of cultural competency in mental health treatment cannot be ignored.

“Our nation’s African American community is going through an extremely painful experience, pain that has been inflicted upon this community repeatedly throughout history and is magnified by mass media and repeated deaths. . . .

“While there is much we need to do to address racism in our country, we must not forget the importance of mental health as we do so. Racism is a public health crisis.”

In fact, depression is prevalent in the Black community and one in four Blacks will experience an anxiety disorder at some point in their life. Exposure to racism and discrimination only exacerbates these issues. Studies suggest that there is a link between chronic exposure to racism and racial battle fatigue (RBF). Symptoms range from frustration and anger to anxiety and depression, from exhaustion to insomnia and physical health issues such as high blood pressure, ulcers and heart problems.

Given all the anger and frustration, experts say there are strategies people can use to channel these emotions into action and focus on their mental health.



- 1. Listen to People Closest to You and to People of Other Races.** When we stop talking and start listening, we validate others' feelings and emotions. We may even discover opportunities to educate. One example: "People will say, my kids don't see color." But if a white person says this to a Black person, it can be offensive. Although it may be well-intended, the idea that people are colorblind is false. It also invalidates people of color who have experiences that are different from their white counterparts. No one wants important parts of their identities to be erased.
- 2. Use Your Voice in Your Community and Workplace.** At the local level, identify a policy that disproportionately affects people of color. Pick an issue in your community. Look at your specific position, job, contacts and more to think about what abilities you might have to promote diversity and equity.
- 3. Give Your Time.** If you've thought about signing up to be a tutor or mentor, now is a great time. Check out the many national civil rights organizations or find a local, grass-roots group. Some options include: Color of Change, National Urban League, Black Lives Matter and Race Forward.
- 4. Speak Up by Using Your Creative Talents.** On social media, we see examples of artists, from painters to jewelry makers, selling their wares and giving proceeds to organizations pushing for change. Art has always been a means to process emotions,

especially difficult ones, and turn them into something tangible.

5. **Practice Self-Care.** The constant barrage of news about deaths, protests, racial trauma and more can feel overwhelming. This is a stressful time, especially for African Americans and people of color. If you are pressuring yourself to act in the fight for equality and justice, remember that it is an ongoing effort. And if you are not okay, it can be difficult to help others. Focus on self-care and mental health first.
6. **Forget the Idea that Black People Don't Seek Mental Health.** Many therapists and psychologists are taking virtual appointments by phone or video conference. If you fear a true mental health crisis, you can also call the 24-hour National Suicide Prevention Hot Line at 800-273-8255. More resources are below.

It's critical that members of the Black community release themselves from that stigma of getting help for mental health and seek it when needed. Racism is very real and can result in traumatic mental, emotional and physical issues. Getting help is a sign of courage, strength and self-advocacy.



### **Resources Recommended by NAMI**

- **Black Emotional and Mental Health Collective (BEAM).** Group aimed at removing the barriers that Black people experience getting access to or staying connected with emotional health care and healing. They do this through education, training, advocacy and the creative arts.
- **Black Mental Health Alliance,** (410) 338-2642. Provides information and resources

and a “Find a Therapist” locator to connect with a culturally competent mental health professional.

- **Black Mental Wellness.** Provides access to evidence-based information and resources about mental health and behavioral health topics from a Black perspective, as well as training opportunities for students and professionals.
- **Ebony's Mental Health Resources by State.** List of Black-owned and focused mental health resources by state as compiled by Ebony magazine.
- **Melanin and Mental Health.** Connects individuals with culturally competent clinicians committed to serving the mental health needs of Black and Latinx/Hispanic communities. Promotes the growth and healing of diverse communities through its website, online directory and events.
- **Ourselves Black.** Provides information on promoting mental health and developing positive coping mechanisms through a podcast, online magazine and online discussion groups.

### **Self-Care for People of Color**

We recognize that many mental health conditions are being triggered as a result of the coronavirus, the economic crisis and repeated racist incidents and death.

Learn more about [mental health conditions](#) including [anxiety disorders](#), [depression](#) and [posttraumatic stress disorder](#).

- [Article](#) on coping with anticipatory grief
- [Article](#) on coping with traumatic stress
- [Article](#) on racial battle fatigue

### **Treatment Directories**

- [Association of Black Psychologists Directory](#)
- [Inclusive Therapists](#)
- [Psychology Today Directory of African American Therapists](#)

### **Educational Resources on Racism and Inequality**

#### **Understanding the Context of Racism and Recent Events**

- [Video](#) on understanding racism and the reactions to the death of George Floyd and many others

- [Video](#) on understanding the perspectives of colleagues of color
- [Article](#) on white privilege: unpacking the invisible knapsack
- [List](#) of anti-racism resources

#### **Ways to Act as an Ally or Champion for People of Color**

- [Article](#) on being a white ally through word, actions and power
- [Article](#) on being a white ally for racial justice
- Community based organizations to partner with: [Color of Change](#), [Black Lives Matter](#), [Change Zero](#), [The Innocent Project](#)

#### **Books to Read**

- [White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism](#) by Robin DiAngelo, PhD
- [How to Be an Antiracist](#) by Dr. Ibram X. Kendi
- [Me and White Supremacy](#) by Layla F. Saad
- [So You Want to Talk About Race](#) by Ijeoma Oluo
- [The Fire Next Time](#) by James Baldwin
- [The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#) by Michelle Alexander

