

Why Should I Learn About Racial Trauma?

Highly-publicized incidents of violence against Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 may affect their mental health and wellbeing—even if they do not experience violence or illness directly. Black and Hispanic people are more likely than non-BIPOC people to know someone who has been seriously impacted by COVID-19,¹ which they may associate with widespread racial and ethnic disparities in health outcomes and access to health care. This can lead to anger, anxiety, or feelings of numbness.²

What is Racial Trauma?

Trauma, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's definition, is the result of "an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being."³ Racial trauma is caused by the stress and pain of experiencing or perceiving racism and discrimination, including being subjected to threats of physical harm, being humiliated or shamed, experiencing micro-aggressions, or witnessing discrimination against others.⁴ Unlike other forms of trauma, racial trauma may be ongoing and have multiple causes.⁵ Racial trauma may span generations, with children affected by their parents' and grandparents' experiences with discrimination or violence.⁶

How Does Racial Trauma Affect People?

Trauma of any type can affect a person's choices, reactions, perceptions, attitudes, fears, and coping strategies. Racial trauma can contribute to increased vigilance, suspicion and distrust, hopelessness, and substance use.⁷ Racial trauma can change a person's views of people, events, and experiences. It also may cause a person to avoid going into service settings where they will be the minority or have historically experienced discrimination.⁸

¹ Pew Research Center (April 14, 2020). *Health concerns from COVID-19 much higher among Hispanics and Blacks than whites*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/>

² Jabbi, M., & Mokruue, K. (2020). *Persistent trauma of systemic racial inequities and the perils of COVID-19*. Anxiety and Depression Association of America. <https://adaa.org/>

³ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (August 2, 2019). *Trauma and violence*. <https://www.samhsa.gov/trauma-violence>

⁴ Comas-Díaz, L., Hall, G. N., & Neville, H. A. (2019). Racial trauma: Theory, research, and healing: Introduction to the special issue. *The American Psychologist*, 74(1), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000442>

⁵ Resler, M. (2019). *Systems of trauma: Racial trauma*. Family and Children's Trust Fund of Virginia. <http://www.fact.virginia.gov/racial-trauma/>

⁶ DeAngelis, T. (2019). The legacy of trauma. *Monitor on Psychology*, 50(2), 36. <https://www.apa.org/>

⁷ Resler, 2019.

⁸ Ibid

How Can Providers Include Racially Sensitive Trauma-Informed Services?

The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness suggests re-examining policies and practices to ensure that people of all races and ethnicities have equal access to pathways out of homelessness, including:

- Assessing whether programs provide equitable access and achieve equitable outcomes;
- Working with staff and individuals with lived experience to identify barriers to equitable access; and
- Building a shared understanding among providers, stakeholders, and community leaders.⁹

Tips for Providing Racially Sensitive Trauma-Informed Homelessness Services

- Learn more about racial and historical trauma in America and how it affects people you serve.
- Listen to the stories of racial trauma told by those you serve and how it has hurt them.
- Be responsive to the racial, ethnic, and cultural needs of those you serve (e.g., staff training, offering peer support, new policies).
- Learn more about [trauma and trauma-informed care](#).

How Should Providers Approach Racially Sensitive Trauma-Informed Services?

Being **culturally competent** gives you the ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures.

Having **cultural humility** means that you engage in a lifelong process of self-reflection and self-critique in which you learn about other cultures, starting with reflecting on your own beliefs and cultural identities. When practicing cultural humility, you approach things with curiosity and can admit when you make a mistake or cause unintentional harm. Exploring your own bias and beliefs about other cultures is key and will help you better serve people of all races and cultures.

Tips for Practicing Cultural Humility and Providing Culturally Competent Homelessness Services

- Think about and actively challenge biases or stereotypes **you** have about certain races and cultures.
- Create a welcoming and safe environment for people of all races and cultures.
- Hire diverse staff. Make your staff reflective of the populations served.
- Be an advocate. Act when you notice any and all instances of discrimination or stereotyping.

Learn More

Racial Trauma: Theory, Research, and Healing: Introduction to the Special Issue:

<https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2019-01033-001.html>

SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach.

https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf

⁹ U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. (July 9, 2018). *How to start addressing racial disparities in your community*. <https://www.usich.gov/>