

Taking Care While Experiencing Racial Stress

A toolkit for the Black Community



An Invitation

I invite you to reflect on your most recent feelings and experiences. Perhaps you'll draw on the events that took place at the Capitol, or maybe the week of the election, or the political climate at large. You may have felt waves of intense shock, anger, fear, sadness, disappointment, or disillusionment. You may have even experienced emotional numbness or extreme apathy. Whatever may have come up for you—or may continue to be coming up for you—know that your feelings are valid. They are normal responses to the abnormal events to which we are bearing witness.

For the Black community specifically, these feelings—or the lack thereof—are likely amplified. For generations, our community has witnessed and experienced the very real impact of racism in all of its forms—both systemically and individually, covert and overt, internal and interpersonal. What I know about the human spirit is that it is adaptive. As such, Black people have had to figure out how to cope with and carry the weight of racism on a day-to-day basis as a means of physical and mental survival. However, our resilience does not make us any less human. Sometimes, distressing events understandably overwhelm our ability to effectively cope.

An important aspect of resiliency is seeking out the kind of help you need when you need it most. One form of support can be education. There's power in knowledge because it promotes an understanding of ourselves, others, and the society in which we live. My clients have repeatedly reported a sense of relief in learning about their symptoms so they can put a name to what they are experiencing.



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I am a mental health provider at Lyra with expertise in culturally-informed, evidence-based practices. My work is rooted in my experience as a Black woman born and raised in southern Louisiana. I have a passion for promoting the importance of mental health in BIPOC communities.

What May be Coming up for You

It's worth noting that racial trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are not the same—PTSD is one type of traumatic response. Below, I've outlined four general categories of reactions to trauma. Please remember that our responses to racism are as diverse as we are a people; what matters most is that we honor our own individual experiences and get the support we need.

There are four broad categories of responses that you may experience as a result of chronic exposure to various racial stressors or traumatic events:

- **Involuntary, recurrent memories or images of a traumatic event.** They also consist of prolonged emotional (e.g., anger, fear) and physiological (e.g., increased heart rate) responses to external reminders of the event. For example, one may notice that they are thinking about events of racial injustice or having images of racially-motivated violence “pop” into their minds even when they are engaging in unrelated activities.
- **Avoidance of internal and external reminders of an event** (across your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors). This may look like avoidance of White-dominant spaces or the way your parents or grandparents avoid talking about negative experiences of White supremacy in the form of racial violence or segregation.
- **Changes in mood and beliefs**, including significant changes in mood and perception of oneself, others, and the world. For example, someone may begin to experience intense feelings of hopelessness, grief, and despair after repeatedly witnessing and/or experiencing police brutality against people from their community.
- **Feeling on edge, having trouble sleeping, or turning to unhelpful coping strategies more often**, such as alcohol and/or drug use. For example, one may notice being “on guard” more than usual when they arrive at work after experiencing repeated microaggressions, insults, and invalidations in the workplace.

What to Expect in This Toolkit

If I've learned anything through my personal experience as a Black cisgender woman, and in my professional experience working with Black clients, it is this: healing begins in the space between honoring the strength of our people to survive the unimaginable, while recognizing that our human need for help by no means takes away from that. In this toolkit, you will find tangible self-care tips for coping with racial stress and trauma, provided by one of my esteemed colleagues, Dr. Andrea Holman. I hope you find them helpful.



Tangible Tools for Taking Care

Adapted from Dr. Andrea Holman's [post](#) on the Lyra blog, "Self-Care for Black Americans Amid Race-Based Traumatic Stress"

- 1. Increase awareness of your internal states.** You cannot care for emotional states of which you are not aware. Check in with yourself, scan your body, and reflect on your emotional and physical state(s). Monitor the parts of your body you know tend to hold stress (such as tension in your shoulders) and simply notice when and where that occurs. Schedule time to sit with and label your emotional states so you can better respond to them.
- 2. Exercise the freedom to "culturally turtleshell."** Choose to primarily engage in places and spaces that are physically safe, familiar, and culturally congruent. Some examples of this might include:
 - Staying at home with family.
 - Consuming some of your favorite, most comforting media created primarily for and by Black Americans.
 - Give yourself permission not to be obliged to converse about certain topics if you do not foresee the conversation to be safe, trusted, and/or mutually beneficial.
 - Give others space and explicit permission to pursue their own education. Release yourself from the burden of educating those around you.
 - Organizing virtual hangouts with those who share your racial identity or any other identities that are important to you. For example, a meetup of Black men raising sons could be validating, normalizing and healing.
 - Engaging in events related to social justice.
 - ...or unapologetically resting and disengaging from the work for a time period that is best for you.
- 3. Tackle the trifecta.** Make sure to address the self-care trifecta: sleep, diet, and exercise. Treat your body well; nourish it like it was made on purpose and with purpose. Fight the lie that Black bodies aren't worth treating well by starting with your own.

4. Exercise the power to choose. Remember that you have complete agency to choose whom you confide in and with whom you interact. Know that you also have the power to choose how much media you consume. There is more drain on the psyche than you might think in scrolling through posts, opinions, and images of lost Black lives. Unapologetically unplug for however long you need to manage your stress.

Secondly, you also have permission to decline invitations to places and spaces that would feel ostracizing, potentially micro-aggressive, and/or unsafe. Given the complex nature of racial injustice and pandemic-related anxiety, you have permission to say no to group gatherings or protests in service to your comfort level. You can also choose to decline because you simply don't want to go. Fight the lie that Black bodies are obligated to be in certain spaces and places.

5. Give yourself permission to say, "This is too much." Allow for days and times when your internal state brings tough, exhausting feelings and responses. You won't always always make the best, most rational decisions. If you fall short around a goal or you find it hard to be at your your best at all times, respond to yourself with kindness and encouragement. Think about the compassion you'd offer to a friend or family member who was struggling, and then offer yourself that same compassionate statement or gesture. That'll help reduce unneeded shame and struggle during a difficult moment which will improve your motivation in the long-term and actually make it easier to bounce back and recover.



Black lives (and minds) truly do matter. Fight the lie that they don't, starting with yourself.

Interested in more support?

Lyra's expert mental health care providers can help you learn personalized tools to feel better. Lyra recently launched a new way to get matched to a provider specializing in symptoms related to systemic racism—so you can get the support you need, when and how you need it.

To get started with Lyra, your mental health benefit, start [here](#).