

# Race-Related Stress and Racial Trauma

*What is it, Why is it Important, How Can We Best Take Care of Ourselves and Others*

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# My Background and Research



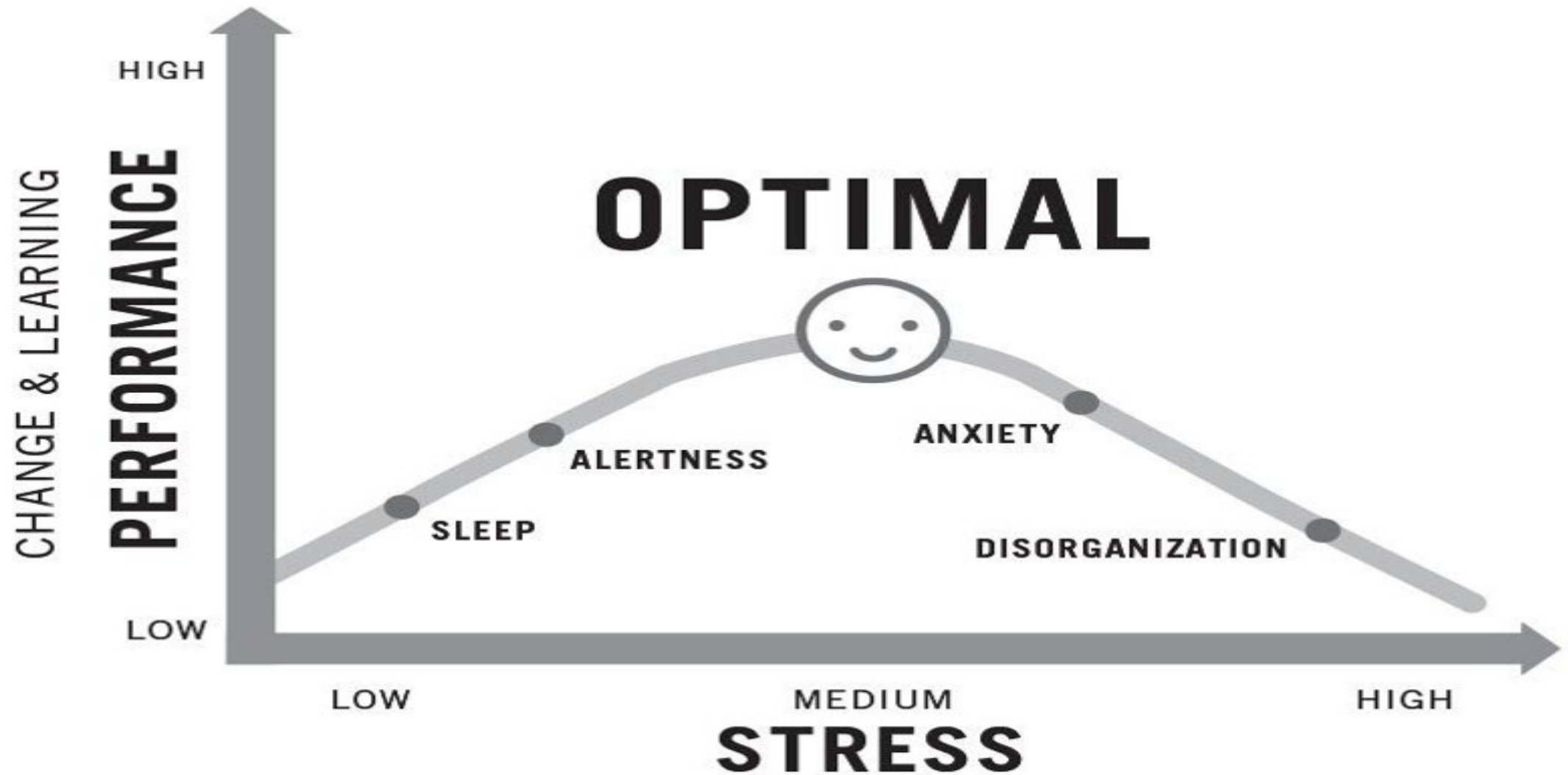
- ▶ Clinical and developmental psychologist and researcher @ Drexel Department of Counseling and Family Therapy & The Center for Family Intervention Science
  
- ▶ Areas of Study:
  1. **Emotional development** in children, teenagers and young adults
  
  2. **Parent-child and Parent-teen relationships and impact on emotional health in youth**
  
  3. **Impact of contextual stressors of racism, sexism and other forms of marginalization and discrimination on emotional and relational health in children, teens and families**

# What is Stress?

## ➤ Stress =

- The sum of the **physical, mental and emotional strains or tensions on a person.**
- Feelings of stress in humans result from interactions between persons and their environment that are perceived as straining or **exceeding their adaptive capacities and threatening their well-being.**
  - Disruption of equilibrium

# Levels of Stress and Effect on Well Being and Performance



# Levels of Stress and Effect on Well Being

## ► Positive stress response

- **is a normal and essential part of healthy development**, characterized by brief increases in heart rate and mild elevations in stress hormones. (e.g. getting a shot, giving a speech)

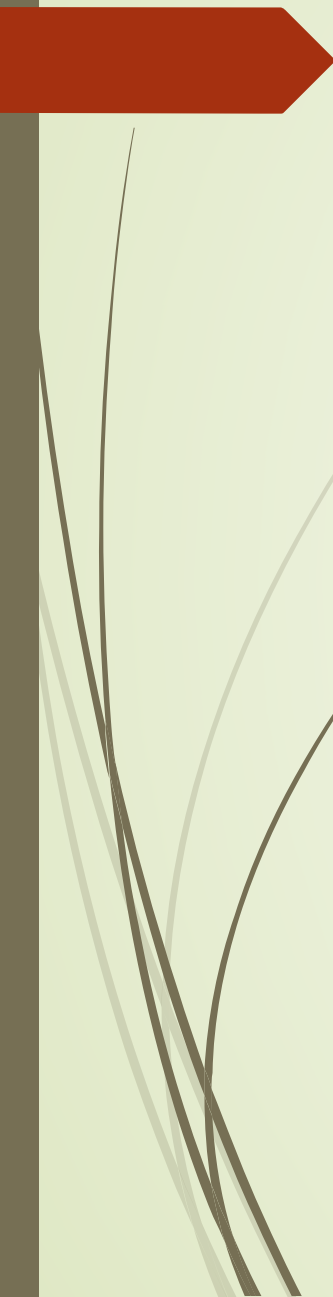
## ► Tolerable stress response

- activates the body's alert systems to a greater degree as a result of more severe, longer-lasting difficulties. (loss of a loved one, a natural disaster, or a frightening injury.)
- **If the activation is time-limited and buffered by positive relationships the brain and other organs recover** from what might otherwise be damaging effects.

## ► Toxic stress response

- **can occur when we experience strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity**—such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and/or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship—without adequate support.
- This kind of prolonged activation of the stress response systems **can disrupt brain chemistry and development and increase the risk for stress-related disease.**

# When does Stress become Trauma?

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- A. Remember, stress comes from experiences and interactions that straining one's ability to adapt to a situation or exceed one's abilities to adapt to a situation.
- A. **Trauma is a very extreme type of stress. Traumatic events are defined as events involve death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violation. We can experience trauma through several ways:**
- ▶ Directly experiencing the event
  - ▶ Witnessing the event as it occurred to someone else (e.g. online, in movies etc.)
  - ▶ Learning about an event where a close relative or friend experienced an actual or threatened trauma
  - ▶ Experiencing repeated exposure to distressing details of an event, such as repeatedly hearing details about an episode of abuse.
- C. Stress disorders, like acute stress disorder and PTSD, are brain and body conditions that happens when we experience a trauma as defined above and it taxes are brains and our bodies so much that we experience at least one of the following intrusive symptoms:
- ▶ Unexpected or expected reoccurring, involuntary, and intrusive upsetting memories of the event
  - ▶ Repeated upsetting dreams where the content of the dreams is related to the traumatic event
  - ▶ The experience of some type of dissociation (for example, flashbacks) where you feel as though the traumatic event is happening again
  - ▶ Strong and persistent distress upon exposure to triggers
  - ▶ Strong bodily reactions (e.g., increased heart rate) upon exposure to a reminder of the traumatic event

# Types of stress

1. General stressors for teenagers?
  - a. For parents of teenagers?
  - b. For teachers of teenagers?
2. For Black and other racialized teenagers?
3. For sexual or gender minority teenagers?
4. For other groups?

## ➤ Common stressors for teens

- School and academic stress, college pressure, stress from social dynamics, stress from dating relationships, stress around sexual development and sexual identity development, family/parent relationship stress

### ➤ ***For parents of teens:***

- Work, money, household management, healthcare management, organizing and running holidays and events, worry about children
- If parents of minority children (defined broadly): worry about experiences of discrimination for children; fear for children

### ➤ ***For teachers of teens:***

- Workload; work-life balance
- Reaching teens and making a difference; doing a good job; being appreciated and respected

## ➤ For Black and other Minority Teens

### ➤ Direct experiences of racial harassment

- Communications that convey fear, lack of trust etc. that have a racial component (e.g. being followed in a store, negative assumptions made based on appearances)
- Social exclusion or bullying with a racial component
- Name-calling, insults, humiliating, racial slurs
- Threats of harm or injury


### ➤ Witnessing racial violence, including hate crimes (in person or through media)

### ➤ Witnessing or experiencing harassment and/or violence by law enforcement

## ➤ For sexual or gender minority teenagers

- Many similarities with minority stress of other groups, with the important addition of experiences of or fear of experiencing family rejection





# Effects of Chronic Race-Related Stress/Racial Battle fatigue

- ▶ [https://www.ted.com/talks/david\\_r\\_williams\\_how\\_racism\\_makes\\_us\\_sick#t-3170](https://www.ted.com/talks/david_r_williams_how_racism_makes_us_sick#t-3170) (11 minutes)



# Protecting Ourselves From the Effects of Race-Related Stress and other Toxic Stress

- ▶ Racial struggle is a but in our social system. It has existed and has been ongoing since the colonization of the Americas.
- ▶ Racism (defined broadly) and marginalization exists in every culture every society. It is a way of othering in order to distribute and maintain power, wealth, etc.
- ▶ Fighting against it and dismantling it is a task that all of us are called on to do, in order to free ourselves and others and make the world a better place.
- ▶ In the struggle to dismantle systems of marginalization and oppression, race-related stress/racial battle fatigue is something we can help each other learn to manage, as opposed to just “getting over it”, powering through it, or rising above every time we experience it.
- ▶ We can find and help others to find healthy and helpful ways to:
  - ▶ process our feelings and experiences
  - ▶ learn triggers
  - ▶ learn how to cope in the crisis moments as well as how to decompress and re-center ourselves afterward.
- ▶ We can't control the way others see us or the situations we're put in, but we can take back the power over our responses to others and, most importantly, how we respond to ourselves when we're *tired*.

# Protecting Ourselves From the Effects of Race-Related Stress and other Toxic Stress:

## Improving Your Awareness is First

- ▶ ***Pay attention to and improve your understanding of your mind-body connection. TAKE CARE OF YOUR BODY TO HELP SOOTHE YOUR MIND.***
- ▶ Check in with yourself.
- ▶ Do a body scan. How is your body feeling? Are your muscles tense? Can you identify the specific emotions you have been experiencing?
- ▶ Common physical symptoms associated with elevated stress (including race-related stress)
  - ▶ Headaches
  - ▶ Trembling
  - ▶ Jumpiness
  - ▶ Chronic pain
  - ▶ Elevated blood pressure
  - ▶ Increased anxiety
  - ▶ Upset stomach/Ulcers
  - ▶ Heavy breathing
  - ▶ Insomnia
  - ▶ Mood swings

# Protecting Ourselves

## From the Effects of Race-Related Stress and other Toxic Stress

1. **Take rest/recovery days** when all you focus on is rest, eating/nutrition, sleep, pleasurable and calming activities.
  - a. Step back when you need to, take care of your own wellbeing.
  - b. **Take pauses from social media and online activities**; *Feed your brain uplifting and calming material for a while.*
  
1. **Learn and practice grounding and centering techniques**
  - a) Prayer
  - b) Meditation and/or breathing exercises
  - c) Yoga (there are also African forms of yoga. See resources sheet.)
  
2. **Learn more** about race-related stress from reliable sources. **Knowledge and education are power.** (See [resource](#) page)
  
3. **Develop your positive racial and cultural identity and ground yourself in your self-worth.**
  1. Make a list of and celebrate your own positive attributes, talents, and accomplishments.
  2. Read, listen to, watch, and go to events that help you regain a sense of pride in your identity.
  3. Read about/watch content about those who have come before you and look to their experiences, wisdom and strength for resilience and pride
  4. Talk with family members, teachers, and community members about your ancestors and those who have come before you. **We stand on the shoulders of giants!!**
  
4. **Build and rely on your relationships and community. Enlist the help of others; you do not have to do this alone!! Community is one of our most important cultural strengths:**
  - a) Enhance your social support system and regain a sense of community.
  - b) Lean on trusted others for support, validation, allyship, and encouragement – and a reminder that you are not alone.
  - c) **Go to counselling!! Find a culturally competent counselor-we do exist!!** Healthcare and mental healthcare is a human right!! (see [resource sheet](#))



# Toni Morrison on the function of racism

- ▶ Winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature. Transcendent author and chronicler of the Black experience in America and the lives of Black families.
- ▶ “The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn’t shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing.”




# Excerpt from Alice Walker Poem, “Each One, Pull One”

We must say it all, and as clearly  
As we can.

Were we black? Were we women? Were we gay?  
Were we the wrong shade of black? Were we yellow?  
Did we, God forbid, love the wrong person,  
Or politics?

But, most of all, did we write exactly what we saw,  
As clearly as we could? Were we unsophisticated  
Enough to cry and scream?

Each one, pull one back into the sun  
We who have stood over  
So many graves  
Know that all of us must live  
Or none.





# Excerpt from Amanda Gorman Inaugural Poem, “The Hill We Climb”

We did not feel prepared to be the heirs  
of such a terrifying hour  
but within it we found the power  
to author a new chapter.  
To offer hope and laughter to ourselves.  
So while once we asked,  
how could we possibly prevail over catastrophe?  
Now we assert,  
How could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?

We will not be turned around  
or interrupted by intimidation,  
because we know our inaction and inertia  
will be the inheritance of the next generation.  
Our blunders become their burdens.  
But one thing is certain,

If we merge mercy with might,  
and might with right,  
then love becomes our legacy,

For there is always light,  
if only we're brave enough to see it.  
If only we're brave enough to be it.



# Guided Mindfulness Meditation

➤ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ula0njZIOh4>







# Questions and Discussion

1. What are the most common things you face with specifically when it comes to the topic of “Racial battle fatigue” and how do you usually propose to them to help them with the situations?
2. What are some coping strategies for racial anxiety?
3. How do I gain back motivation to do schoolwork and study?
4. What do I do since I’m so mentally drained to the extent that it affects my grades and my mood. I end up crying some nights because I’m so stressed about school.
5. How do I deal with pressure from my mom about my grades. She asks me about all of my tests and it stressed me out so much that if I get a grade lower than 80, I have an anxiety attack.
6. How do I deal with anxiety from stressing about school. I ask people for advice but I always get the same coping mechanism answers and they don’t work for me.