

[ptsd & trauma](#)

## Racism and Mental Health

**Experiencing racial discrimination and injustice can take a heavy emotional toll and trigger chronic stress, anxiety, depression, and racial trauma. But there are ways to strengthen your resilience and protect your mental health.**



### **How racism affects your mental health**

Horrifying images of police brutality and the protests they spark tend to grab the news headlines. But if you're Black or another racial minority, experiencing racism and

discrimination is often a daily but overlooked reality—and it can take a serious toll on your mental health, increasing your risk for depression, anxiety, stress, trauma, and substance abuse.

As a person of color, you're far more likely to experience negative life events such as poverty, unemployment, incarceration, or abuse. Our society often overlooks black and minority contributions to history and culture, popular movies and TV shows tend to focus only on negative racial stereotypes, and some prominent politicians advocate hateful, violent bigotry. Financial institutions are less likely to grant you credit—or charge much more for doing so. And when disaster strikes, such as the global coronavirus pandemic and the resulting economic fallout, it's our black and minority communities that bear the brunt of the suffering.

Then there are the subtler forms of racism that pervade modern life. The security guard who follows you around the store because of the color of your skin. The police officers who stop and search you without cause. The business that denies you service. The boss who overlooks you for promotion—again. The white people who cross the street when you approach, avoid sitting next to you on the bus, or hold their bags tighter when you step into an elevator. Such prevalent “micro-aggressions” can be emotionally scarring and leave you feeling marginalized, overwhelmed by stress, and devalued as a human being. You may rage against the lack of equality in our society, despair at the sense of powerlessness, or feel traumatized by the injustice of it all.

Whatever your experiences of racism, it's important to remember that you're not alone. There is strength in numbers and there are steps you can take to better [cope with circumstances outside of your control](#), no matter how abhorrent they may be. There is also hope. Powerful movements are pushing for social change around the world and many more people finally seem to be taking note. While personal bias and systemic and institutional racism aren't going to disappear overnight, there are plenty of things you can do to stand up to discrimination, strengthen your family and community, and protect your mental health in the face of ignorance and intolerance.

## **What is racial trauma?**

Racial trauma or race-based traumatic stress stems from exposure to racist abuse or discrimination. It can erode your sense of self-worth and lead to anxiety, [depression](#), chronic stress, [high blood pressure](#), disordered eating, substance abuse, and even symptoms of PTSD such as hypervigilance, negative thoughts, and mood changes.

[\[Read: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder\]](#)

You don't need to experience racism firsthand to feel traumatized or for your mental health to suffer. Watching news reports of police brutality against black people, witnessing prejudice against your friends, family, or neighbors, or being subjected to the distressing rhetoric of some political leaders can also cause racial trauma.

Racial trauma can even be passed down from one generation to the next, through the recounting of harrowing stories, for example, or the sustained mistreatment of a community. Research has shown that by the time they are a year old, black infants have higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol than white infants, suggesting they're already adversely reacting to discrimination and bias.

## Racism and barriers to mental health care

Not only does racism trigger mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and trauma, it also adds barriers to getting help. For many black people or minorities there's a great disparity in access to mental health resources. Even if you have access to a doctor or therapist, you may still encounter discrimination within the health care system itself. A lack of cultural understanding or prejudice on the part of a medical professional can result in a misdiagnosis or inappropriate treatment, or even discourage you from continuing to seek help.

Other barriers to getting mental health care include:

**Stigma.** Mental health still carries a stigma for many people, including those in some black and minority communities. Many black men, for example, see having a mental health problem as a personal failure or a sign of weakness. Rather than seek help, they're more likely to bottle up their suffering or try to tough it out alone.

**Too few black or minority therapists.** In western countries, most therapists, counsellors, and other mental health professionals are white. Studies indicate that a white therapist misinterpreting a black client's experience can lead to dangerous misdiagnoses. Black men, for example, are much more likely to be incorrectly diagnosed with [schizophrenia](#) than their white counterparts.

**Misunderstanding of mental health problems** by some religious leaders in black and Asian communities. For many of us, religious institutions like churches or mosques play an important role in supporting our mental and emotional well-being. However, some religious

figures mistake mental health problems for failings of faith or even discourage professional treatment.

## **Prioritizing self-help**

Whether you have access to professional treatment or not, there are effective self-help steps you can take to improve how you feel and protect your mental health. Whether racial prejudice and discrimination has left you feeling exhausted, hopeless, anxious, or traumatized, the following strategies can help you gain a sense of empowerment, [build your resilience](#), and face the future with more optimism.

## **Reach out to others and share your pain**

Whether you've experienced a blatant racist attack or suffered one or more micro-aggressions, it's normal to feel angry, upset, or hopeless. It's also normal to want to bottle up your experiences of racism or try to pretend that they haven't affected you. But keeping painful feelings to yourself will only amplify them and adversely impact your mental and physical health. The first step to healing is to openly and honestly share your experiences with others.

The simple act of talking with someone who makes you feel heard and understood can trigger hormones that calm your nervous system, [relieve stress](#), and ease the symptoms of depression and anxiety. In fact, a 2019 study found that black women who regularly opened up about their experiences of everyday racism were less likely to exhibit the signs of chronic stress, premature aging, and ill health than those who kept their experiences to themselves.

Talking about your experiences can also make them seem less intense. Acknowledging and expressing feelings of sadness, anger, or anxiety, for example, can help prevent you from becoming overwhelmed and better enable you to cope with similar emotions in the future.

**Try to prioritize face-to-face contact.** Although it's not always possible in the age of social distancing, it's the act of looking another person in the eye as you talk that offers the most benefit. Obviously, the person you talk to doesn't need to be able to offer solutions—systemic racism isn't something that will ever be solved easily—but they do need to be a good listener, someone who can understand your experiences and acknowledge your feelings.

**Reach out to those closest to you**, such as your partner, family, and friends. Opening up won't make you a burden to others. In fact, most friends and loved ones will be flattered

that you trust them enough to confide in them, and it will only strengthen your relationship.

**Look for support within your community.** If you feel that you don't have any friends or family who'll listen without negatively judging you, try reaching out to a cultural or community center, school or youth counsellor, sports coach, religious organization, like-minded people on social media, or a respected neighbor in your area.

[\[Read: How to Make Good Friends\]](#)

**Listen to others when they reach out to you.** Make yourself available to support others just as you would like them to support you. Listening attentively to another person's experiences of racism and making them feel heard and understood can be just as beneficial for you as it is for them. Supporting others can help reduce your own stress, combat feelings of isolation and depression, and protect your mental health. Think of it as being each other's therapist.

## Embrace your ethnicity

Racism is often used as a weapon to devalue you as a human being and lower your self-esteem. You can counter that and help deflect the pain of racism by developing a strong sense of your ethnic identity, embracing your heritage, and taking pride in your culture and history.

The identity of each one of us is closely intertwined with the experiences we share with others of a similar background. Living in a white-dominated society, though, often means that the experiences of black and minority cultures are devalued or marginalized. To develop and maintain a better sense of your own ethnic identity, you can:

**Educate yourself on the history of your race.** Black history, for example, didn't begin with slavery. Both Africa and the Caribbean have long and proud histories, with Africa being the birthplace of humanity and the cradle of civilization. The more you learn about the history of your race, the better you can steel yourself against the ignorance that fuels prejudice and discrimination.

**Research your family history.** Grandparents, genealogical websites, and DNA testing can all help you investigate your family's lineage, discover distant relatives, and explore your roots. Most of us can't afford to travel to our ancestors' homeland to experience it firsthand, but we can learn more about its history and culture online, watch relevant travel shows, or learn the country's language and traditions.

**Embrace your culture** through books, music, art, film, or food. Look for books written by black or minority authors, for example, films that tell stories important to your ethnicity, or art and music that speaks directly to you. Cook a meal in your ethnic cuisine or rekindle the unique customs and traditions of your culture.

**Strengthen your community ties.** Sharing closer ties to people who share your experiences can help reduce the sense of isolation that often stems from racism. Join community groups and cultural programs, [volunteer](#) to help others in your community, or simply reach out to those in need—[people at risk during COVID](#), for example, or kids in need of guidance or mentorship.

## Channel your anger

Enduring the injustice of racial bigotry and discrimination can understandably make even the most even-tempered person seethe with rage. [Venting your anger](#) in an uncontrolled way, though—especially at white law enforcement officers or other figures of authority—will only make a bad situation even worse.

No matter how much your anger is justified, expressing it in a knee-jerk fashion will impair your judgement, diminish your chances of being heard, and negatively affect your health. Similarly, trying to mute or suppress your anger will also have a negative impact on your mental and physical health. The key is to harness your anger and channel it in a constructive way to provoke meaningful change.

**Join an anti-racism or other activist group.** As the Black Lives Matter demonstrations around the world have proved, there's real power and influence when people come together and express their anger in a profound, meaningful way. Not everyone is supportive, of course, but they are all taking notice.

**Vote and encourage others in your community to do the same.** Campaign for an issue or candidate important to you. Make your voice heard, whether it's on a local or national level, at school, or in the workplace.

**Direct your anger into creative pursuits.** Writing down your experiences and sharing them with others or making music, art, or films are great ways to constructively vent your anger, tell your story, and make your feelings heard. Creativity can help communicate even the most difficult thoughts and emotions and reach people who wouldn't normally listen.

**Diffuse your anger with humor.** When you bring humor to the fight for social justice, it

doesn't mean you're not taking it seriously. Rather, [finding humor](#) in bleak situations can help to diffuse anger and pain, inspire hope, and reframe unpleasant situations so they seem less threatening. You don't need to embark on a stand-up routine, but finding ways to laugh at the world we live in with friends and like-minded people can add joy to your life and prevent you from feeling overwhelmed.

## **Learning to gain control of your emotions**

If you have a hot temper, you may feel there's little you can do to control your anger when confronted by racial discrimination or abuse. But while you can't control the racist behavior of others or how it makes you feel, you can learn to control how you express your rage.

Using HelpGuide's free [Emotional Intelligence Toolkit](#), you can learn to manage difficult emotions in healthier ways, cool down quickly, and better manage your anger, even in the face of extreme provocation.

## **Allow yourself to feel hope—even gratitude**

When you're struggling against racial injustice and oppression, it can seem that everything in life is negative. But even in the bleakest, most distressing times, it's usually possible to find reasons to be optimistic, however small and seemingly insignificant.

[\[Read: Finding Joy During Difficult Times\]](#)

Allowing yourself to feel hope can make a huge difference to your mental health. And studies have shown that acknowledging and expressing gratitude can help improve symptoms of depression, boost your self-esteem, and even strengthen your immune system.

**Acknowledge even the smallest signs of change** and draw hope from them. More white people do seem to be opening their eyes to the harsh inequalities that exist in our society. Some are even actively willing to educate themselves on the issues and support calls for change. Of course, society tends to evolve only slowly, but to change attitudes and policies it helps to believe that the small changes occurring today will eventually become the major changes we want to see tomorrow.

**Try to find something positive about each day, however small.** The colors of fall leaves, a favorite song playing on the radio, a message from a friend, or an uplifting story in

the newspaper. Being grateful for something in your life doesn't mean denying the pain of racial inequality and injustice. And it doesn't mean you're simply trying to put a brave face on your problems. But by trying to find the good in even the worst days, you can help to boost the levels of serotonin and other feel-good chemicals in your brain, improving your mood and outlook.

**Write these moments down.** It sounds corny, but making a note of the small things that bring you hope and gratitude—in a journal or on your phone, for example—can help remind you of the good that still exists in the world, improve your outlook, and boost your resilience.

## Take care of yourself

Having to cope with the daily pain and stress of racial discrimination can be emotionally and physically exhausting. You may feel constantly on edge in a workplace that does nothing to address harassment or inequality, targeted as you walk or drive through white neighborhoods, or drained from trying to be a cheerleader for diversity.

Feeling in a heightened state of stress and anxiety can lead to serious health problems, impact your immune and digestive systems, increase your risk of heart attack and stroke, and [lead to burnout](#), a state of mental and physical exhaustion. Since your body and mind are so closely linked, taking care of yourself is an important part of coping with racism, getting through times of overwhelming stress, and steeling yourself for the challenges to come.

**Exercise.** Exercising regularly can ease stress, anxiety, and anger, give your spirits a lift, and boost your self-esteem. There's [no single exercise that's right for everyone](#). The key is to choose an activity you enjoy and stick with it. Make time in your day to go for a walk or run, for example, dance—on your own, with a loved one, or with your kids—lift weights, or hit a punching bag or pillow to release your frustration and burn off tension.

**Manage stress.** Relaxation techniques such as yoga, deep breathing, and meditation can help relieve stress, calm your anxious mind, and bring your nervous system back into balance. An easy way to get started is by using one of HelpGuide's guided [audio meditations](#).

[\[Read: Relaxation Techniques for Stress Relief\]](#)

**Eat right.** When you're stressed, anxious, or depressed, it's natural to turn to the comfort of



takeout and convenience food. But while these foods are often tasty, they tend to be loaded with calories, sugar, and preservatives, and lacking in essential nutrients. Eating a healthier diet can make a huge difference to your mood, energy, and outlook. Even when so many of us are out of work or living on a tight budget, it's still possible to find food that is both [wholesome and affordable](#).

**Get enough sleep.** When you're working two jobs or long hours, taking care of a family, or enduring high levels of stress, scrimping on sleep may seem like the best solution. But not getting enough [quality sleep at night](#) can impact your mood, energy, and ability to handle stress. Most adults need seven to nine hours of sleep every night to cope with the rigors of daily life.

## **Find a “safe” place**

Everyone needs a safe place to retreat to each day—a place to relax, recharge, and let down your guard without feeling stressed, on edge, or a target for racism. For some people, that place is home. But if you live in a crime-ridden neighborhood or have a turbulent family life, home may not feel safe or a place you can totally relax, so you'll need to look further afield.

Many people find their safe place in a church, mosque, or other religious institution, a place where you can be with like-minded people who share your faith and values. Or you could try a community center, local library or recreational facility, after-school-program, or any place where you're able to take a break from ongoing, relentless stress.

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## **[Will you help keep HelpGuide free for all?](#)**

One in four people will struggle with mental health at some point in their lives. And with the coronavirus pandemic and troubled economy, many are in crisis right now. More than ever, people need a trustworthy place to turn to for guidance and hope. That is our mission at HelpGuide. Our free online resources ensure that everyone can get the help they need when they need it—no matter what health insurance they have, where they live, or what they can afford. But as a nonprofit that doesn't run ads or accept corporate sponsorships, we need your help. If you have already contributed, thank you. If you haven't, please consider helping us reach those who need it: [Donate today from as little as \\$3](#).

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## Get more help

[Healing in the Face of Cultural Trauma](#) (PDF) - A black self-care toolkit. (ABPsi.org)

[Anti-Racism Resources](#) - Links to organizations, campaigns, and other resources in the UK and U.S. (Survivors Network)

[Black Virtual Wellness Directory](#) - Directory of black therapists, psychologists, and advocates in the U.S. (BEAM)

## Sources

[The development of the cortisol response to dyadic stressors in black and white infants](#) - Study findings of race-related cortisol reactivity in infants. (Cambridge University Press)

[Influence of Patient Race and Ethnicity on Clinical Assessment in Patients with Affective Disorders](#) - Study showing elevated numbers of black men diagnosed with schizophrenia in the U.S. (JAMA)

[Perceived racism in relation to telomere length among African American women in the Black Women's Health Study](#) - Study associating everyday racism with biomarkers for chronic stress among women who reported not discussing those experiences with others. (Science Direct)