

Understanding and Addressing Race-Related Stress and Trauma for Black Americans

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Overview

- Overview of racial stress and trauma (RST) and consequences
- Challenges and clinical issues identifying RST
- Methods to identify, process, and heal from RST

Learning Objectives

- Develop an understanding of racial stress and trauma (RST) or racial trauma
- Identify culturally-informed assessment tools and learn therapeutic strategies to discuss racism and process RST with clients in the therapeutic context
- Discuss practices and identify resources that can contribute to racial healing, strength/resilience, and empowerment for Black Americans





Risk and Prevalence of Trauma Across the Life Course

Trauma as a Chronic Stressor in Black Lives

- Research suggests that Black youth and adults have increased prevalence and risk for trauma exposure (Maguire-Jack, 2019; Stropolis et al., 2019)
 - Almost 65% of African American youth report traumatic experiences compared to 30% of their peers from other races.
- Increased exposure can lead to disparities in adulthood
 - Black adulthoods may develop posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at higher rates than White adults, and that the clinical course of PTSD is poor (Sibrava et al., 2019).



Trauma as a Chronic Stressor in Black Lives

- African Americans have significantly higher rates of objective life stressors, such as witnessing violence, receiving bad news, and losing a loved one prematurely (Turner & Avison, 2003).
 - Concentrated disadvantage, particularly in urban communities, places African Americans at disproportionate risk for exposure to violence and trauma.
- Theoretical models of early childhood adversity have largely neglected the multifaceted influence of multiple forms of traumatic stressors on mental and physical health outcomes (Bernard et al., 2020).





Conceptualization of Trauma among African Americans

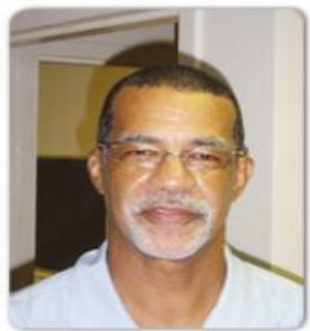
Trauma Exposure and PTSD within Context

- Although low-income Black Americans have high lifetime rates of PTSD and are exposed to relatively more traumatic events, these racial disparities persist even when controlling for trauma exposure and socioeconomic status (Roberts et al., 2011)
 - Racial discrimination
- The importance of considering the place that traumatic experiences hold in social power structures



Racism as an Acknowledged Chronic Stressful Stimulus

- Racism is a pervasive stressor that may get “under the skin” and “into the mind”
- Stress related to racism-driven injustice is embedded within the fabric of US society
- Dr. Janet Helms: **One reason that racial trauma is missing from contemporary trauma research, theory and practice is that the broad historical foundations of racial trauma, and its developmental effects, often are sufficiently diffuse and pervasive that they do not provide objective evidence that a particular individual has been harmed more than others.**



Racial Stress and Trauma

- One factor that may account for increased risk and prevalence of trauma exposure for Black individuals is racism (Bernard et al., 2020).
- Racial trauma - frightening, dangerous, upsetting, or violent race-based incidents, involving a threat to the bodily integrity of self or others (Carter, 2007).
- Racial Trauma: “overwhelms one’s coping capacity and impacts quality of life and/or cause fear, helplessness, & horror...” (Carter, 2007)
- While not all racial incidents lead to PTSD, they can be emotionally painful, sudden, uncontrollable, cumulative, and illicit trauma symptoms (Carlson, 1997).

Racial Trauma and PTSD in the DSM-5

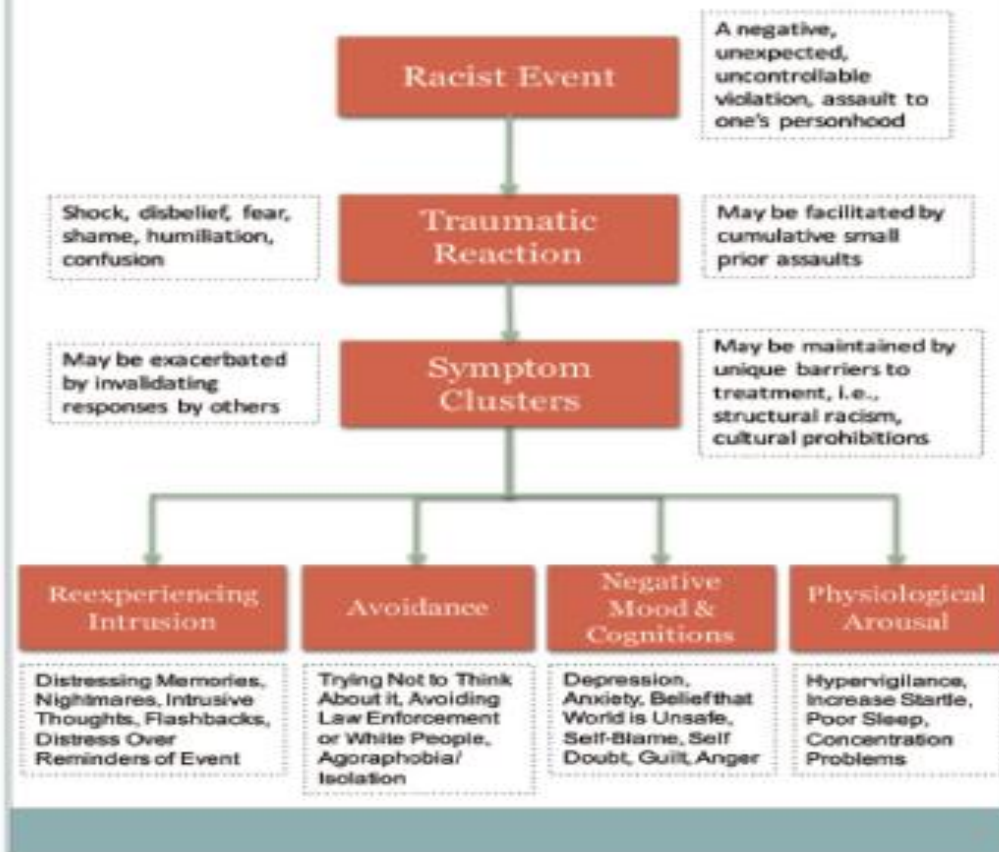


Figure 2. Example of racial trauma within the framework of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.). PTSD – posttraumatic stress disorder. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Racial Stress and Trauma: Racial Trauma

- Substantial evidence indicates that race-based experiences can lead to negative psychological and physiological outcomes (e.g., Carter, 2017; Pieterse et al., 2012).
- Although studies show that multiple race-related encounters may occur on a daily basis for youth (e.g., English et al., 2019), RST is often overlooked and not assessed in evaluating traumatic experiences (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005)..... yet

Racial Trauma

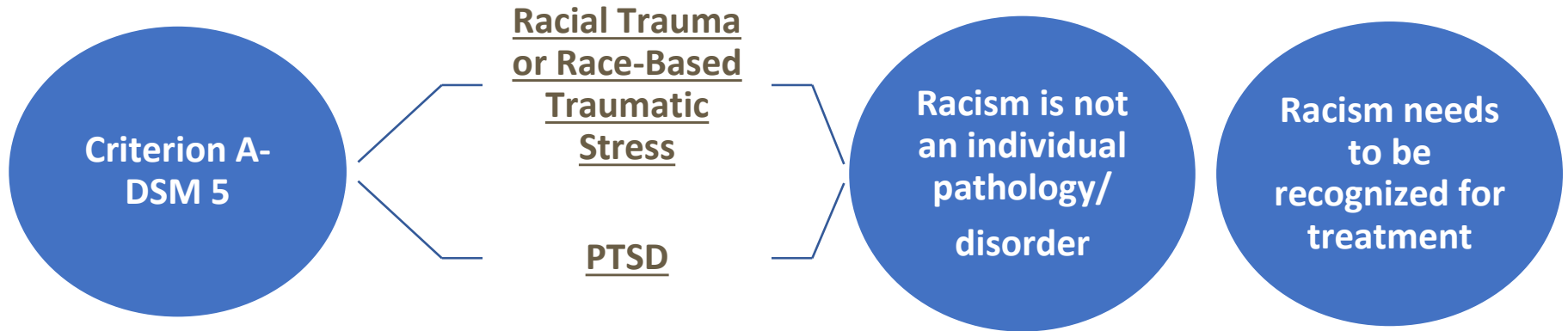
- Common overlooked experiences could include:
 - Humiliating and shaming events
 - Threats of harm and injury
 - Online footage and discussions about police-perpetrated killings
 - Experiencing or witnessing racial violence toward people who share your racial-ethnic background
 - Deportations and mistreatment of immigrants
 - Racial bullying
 - Witnessing racial discrimination towards others



Racial Trauma & Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

- There is a choice made about what can be considered traumatic in our diagnostic manual and this has changed over time
- Racism can be considered a potentially unique type of stressor and traumatic experience because of its historical legacy in the U.S. and multi-systemic effects.
 - DSM 5: “exposure to war, threatened or actual physical assault (e.g., physical attack, robbery, ...), threatened or actual sexual violence (e.g., forced sexual penetration...), being kidnapped, being taken hostage, terrorist attack, torture, incarceration as a prisoner of war, natural or manmade disasters, and severe motor vehicle accidents”
- *“Being Black, my traumas don’t end.”*

Racial Trauma & Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)



Racial Trauma & Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

- *It is important to note that we are not categorizing normal responses to racism as disordered* (Carter et al., 2005)
- *Similar to rape and domestic violence, racist incidents are the problem and are the root of the disorder; people should not be stigmatized as problematic when they are responding to emotional and sometimes physical assaults to their integrity”* (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005)
- *Post-racism distress is a normal response to an abnormal experience or a sane response to an insane stressor”* (Green, 2004)

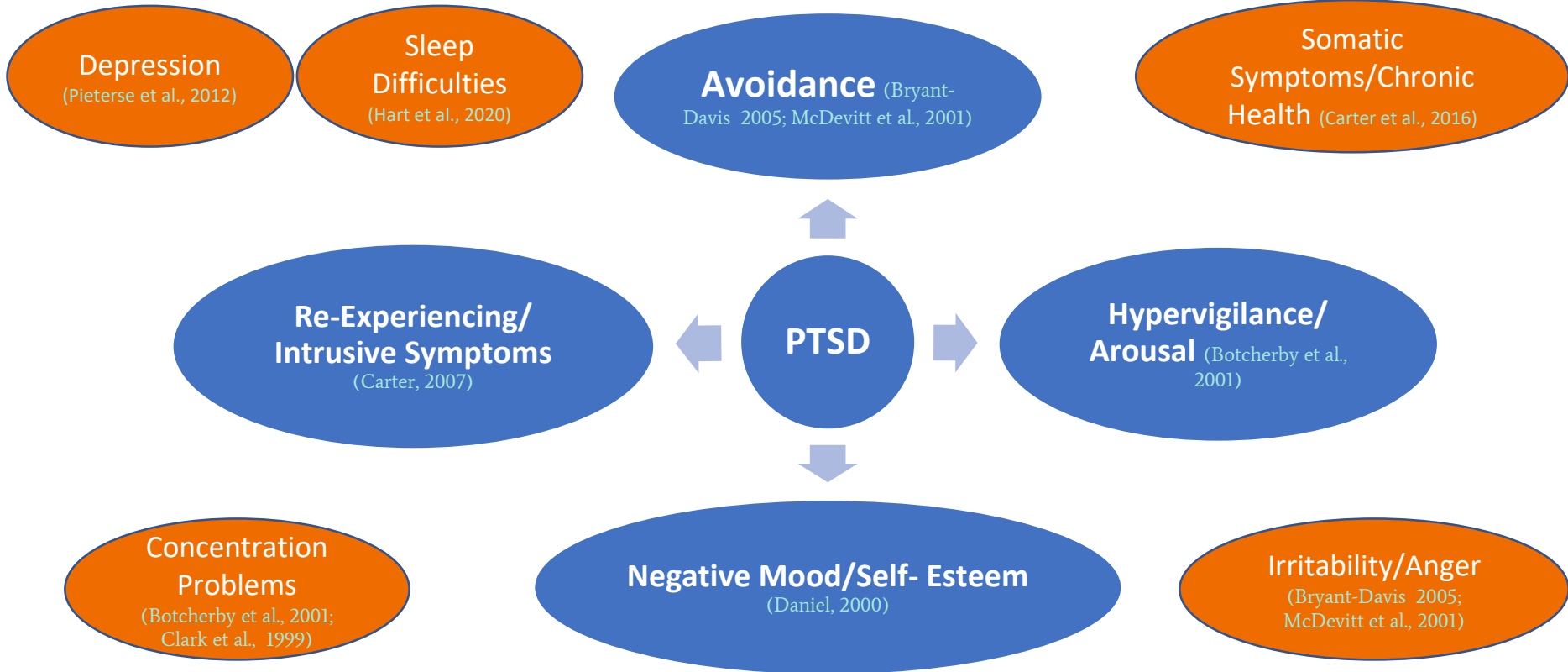




**RACISM AND
TRAUMA:
INTERCONNECTED
AND
MULTIFACETED**

- ▶ Understanding the lived experiences of Black Americans requires a racial health equity lens and historical consciousness
- ▶ **“Some of us did not die like Eric (Garner)...we’re still here.”**

Racial Discrimination & PTSD Symptoms



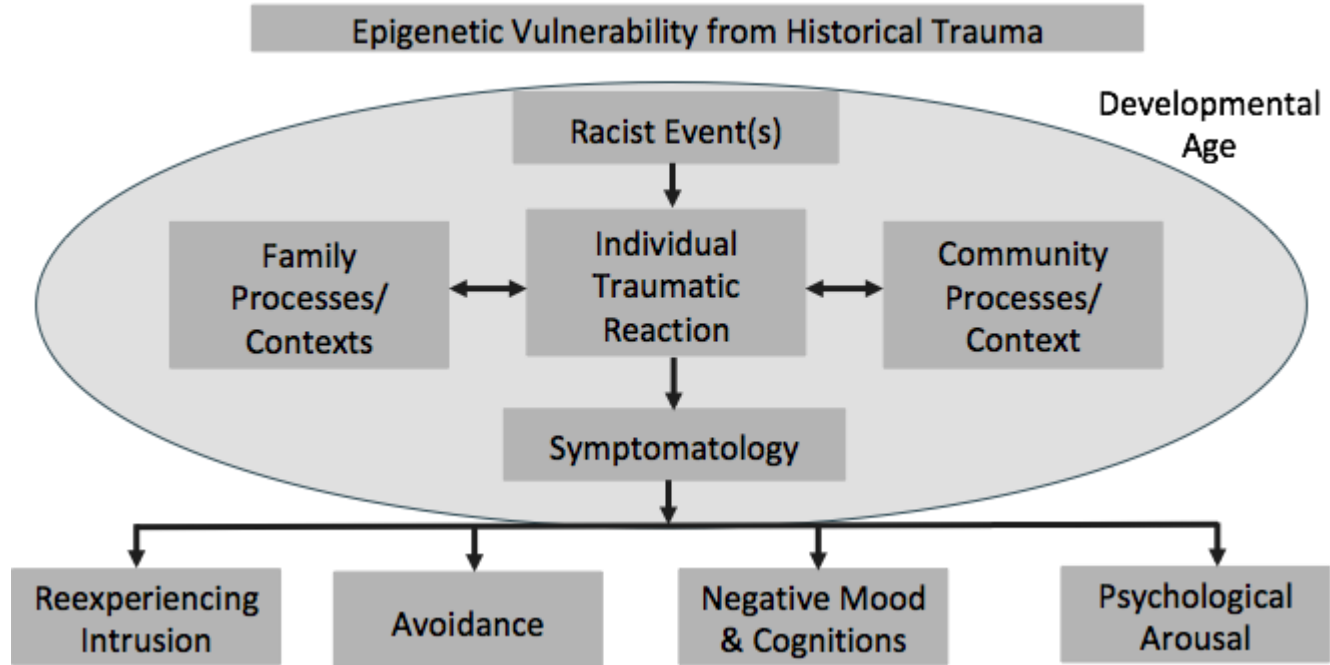
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Developmental Considerations

Developmental Considerations For Youth

- Exposure to RST
- Manifestation of trauma symptomatology
- Awareness of racism
- Coping with racism
- Influence of family and community systems and how these systems are integral to youth's interpretation and management of RST

Developmental Ecological Model of Youth Racial Trauma



Developmental Considerations: Intergenerational Impact of Racialized Traumatic Experiences

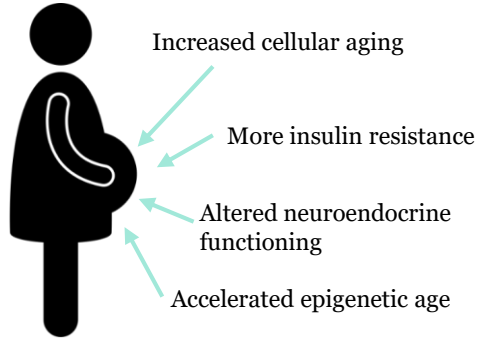
- Studies of children of Holocaust survivors and multiple generations of Native Americans suggest a link between these racialized traumatic experiences and the well-being of future generations
 - Biological Embedding: How racism “gets under the skin” for generations
 - Limited research on the impact of slavery on current generations of Black people
- The traumatic effects of enslavement were transferred to successive generations (Crawford, Nobles, & DeGruy, 2003; DeGruy, 2017)
- The effects of environmental challenges faced by a parent may be displayed by offspring despite the children not encountering the same challenges

Intergenerational Impact of Racism: Posttraumatic Slave Syndrome

- DeGruy (2017) argued that decreased self-esteem, ever present anger, and racist socialization are the psychological markers for posttraumatic stress syndrome and explain intergenerational family discord and the numerous disparities in health outcomes.
- Example: “I have to work twice as hard”



Prenatal



Individual Level Factors

- Racial discrimination, prejudice, and stigma experienced by the mother
- Racial trauma
- Racial profiling

Community Level Factors

- Exposure to hate crimes
- Exposure to racially-motivated violence

Structural Level Factors

- Structural racism
- Historical trauma
- Segregation
- Neighborhood deprivation and housing instability
- Exposure to pollutants
- Poor quality education
- Poverty
- Access to health care

Birth



- Discriminatory hospital practices
- Access to health care
- Increased risk for maternal mortality
- Increased risk for poor birth outcomes such as preterm birth and low birth rate

Infancy



- Altered physiological responses to stress in infants
 - Lower heart rate variability
 - Greater cortisol reactivity

***Intergenerational Effects of Racism and Trauma**



Challenges and Clinical Issues Identifying Racial Stress and Trauma

Challenges Identifying RST

- Despite evidence on the detrimental effects of RST or racial trauma, it may still be misperceived, dismissed, or unacknowledged by clinicians (Carter, 2007; Helms et al., 2012)
- Barriers often include:
 - Lack of awareness
 - Narrow and exclusive scope of the DSM-5 PTSD criteria
 - Bias and discomfort surrounding racial topics

(e.g., Bryant-Davis & Ocampo 2006; Comas-Díaz 2016)

Challenges Identifying RST

- Oversight can impact a clinician's ability to
 - Properly assess, diagnose, and treat clients
 - Make appropriate treatment decisions
 - Build healthy rapport

- May lead to a misunderstanding of the etiology of trauma and the invalidation of trauma

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Methods to Identify, Process, and Heal from Racial Stress and Trauma

Assessment

- Clinical interview, inquiring about racial stress and trauma
 - *“Have ever been treated in a disturbing manner because of your race?”*
 - *“Have you witnessed someone else being treated in a disturbing manner due to any racial, ethnic, or cultural factors?”*
- Adaptations to trauma screeners
 - E.g., UCLA, Trauma Events Inventory, Life Events Checklist-DSM-5 - Add in question about racial incidents
- Racial Discrimination Measures
 - Uconn Racial/ Ethnic Stress and Trauma Survey (UnRESTS; Williams et al., 2018)
 - Index of Race-Related Stress for Adolescents (Utsey, 1996)
 - Prolonged Activation and Anticipatory Race-Related Stress Scale (Utsey et al., 2013)
 - Perceptions of Racism in Children and Youth (PRaCY; Pachter et al., 2010)

These questions are related to traumatic or stressful events that you might have experienced, witnessed, or been confronted with (i.e.- someone told you the event happened).

Have you ever experienced a natural disaster (such as a tornado, hurricane, or flood)?

- No
- Yes
- N/A
- Incomplete

How many times?

- 1x
- 2x-3x
- 4x-5x
- 6x-8x
- 9x-10x
- 11x-15x
- 16x-19x
- >20x
- N/A
- Incomplete

*Traumatic Events Inventory

How old were you the FIRST time it happened?

When was the most RECENT time?

- NEVER happened to me
- Within the LAST MONTH
- Within the last 6 months
- Within the last year
- Within the last 5 years
- More than 5 years ago
- N/A
- Incomplete

How old were you when the worst incident occurred (rounded to the nearest year)?

Preliminary Mixed-Methods Studies on Measuring Racial Trauma and Strength-Based Responses



Table 1. *Table of IRRS & PTSD Symptom Severity Related to Traditional and Race-Related Trauma*

*Utilized the Clinician-Administered PTSD Scale for DSM-5; IRRS = Index of Race Related Stress

IRRS	Overall PTSD Severity Sum-Traditional	Overall PTSD Severity Sum- Race-Related
35	15	5
55	4	5
72	22	31*
33	18*	14*
29	28*	27*
6	0	0
44	0	0
49	37*	21*
76	59*	47*
59	63*	46*
25	19	9
27	0	0
73	18	13
3	10	2
49	11	9

*All 5 Black women who met criterion for PTSD from Criterion A trauma also met criterion for PTSD from racism-related trauma

Preliminary Mixed-Methods Studies on Measuring Racial Trauma and Strength-Based Responses

*Interviews began in 2020 during Black Lives Matter Movement



Themes from the UConn Racial/Ethnic Stress & Trauma Survey (UnRESTS)

Centrality of Identity and Transgenerational Strength

Positive messaging helps with coping with racial trauma.

- *"It was just so much that they would tell me about being proud of it and as a I got older, I started to realize that being Black, I feel like is a privilege... So, if it's a privilege why not be proud of it?"*
- *"You know what's right and your Black is beautiful, don't go off of nobody else opinion. Just go off what you think."*
- *"Oh yeah all the time, they always used to tell me, still to this day to be proud to be who you are. Yeah so, I am very proud to be who I am and in my skin like I am very very very proud of it."*

Preliminary Mixed-Methods Studies on Measuring Racial Trauma and Strength-Based Responses

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Themes from the UConn Racial/Ethnic Stress & Trauma Survey (UnRESTS)

Dehumanization & Fear for Safety

Black people are dehumanized through hypersexualization, hypermasculinization, and themes of inhuman strength. Reports of fear for the safety of their children, especially male children was prominent.

- *"Your skin is a weapon to them."*
- *"They was down there calling us n****rs and ain't gone be s**t and we get what happened to us. They said Black is not the standard considered human"*
- *"And you don't hear stories happening to other people... and to other children."*
- *"They write you off as a number and that impacts me because that's my husband and I want him home."*

Assessment and Treatment

- Deciding who to assess
 - Standard and/or BIPOC Individuals (Scurfield & Mackey, 2001).
- Being aware of one's own cultural heritage, biases, limitations
- Being informed, sensitive, and respectful of others' heritage and experiences (Carter, 2007)
 - Knowledge, understanding historical and current sociopolitical factors that affect communities of color
 - Skills and tools - sending and receiving culturally adequate verbal and nonverbal messages

Treatment

- Steps to create an environment that is safe for therapists to assess and clients to disclose racial trauma (Bryant-Davis, 2006)
 - Trauma history and assessment, including race-based traumas
 - Therapeutic relationship focus
 - Therapeutic process focus
 - **Respond with belief and support**

Treatment

- Common steps in processing RST (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2006)
 - Acknowledge
 - Share
 - Safety and self-care
 - Grieve
 - Shame and self-blame/internalized racism
 - Anger
 - Coping strategies
 - Resistance strategies

Current PTSD Treatments and Racism Among Black Adults

- Important to understand that racial discrimination can exacerbate current PTSD symptoms and/or racial discrimination may be the current presenting concern
 - Let's consider major treatment component concepts such as "Stuck Points" & "Cognitive Distortions" in PTSD and CBT treatments when it comes to racial trauma
 - Assessments of trauma exposure: How do Participants "Label" Their Trauma Experiences?
- More research is needed to understand what are the most effective PTSD treatments for Black Americans across the lifespan that experience racial discrimination
 - Black children experience distress related to racism and trauma
 - Engage in trauma-informed care that acknowledges that racism could be playing a role in symptom presentation

Considerations for Mental Health Treatment of PTSD

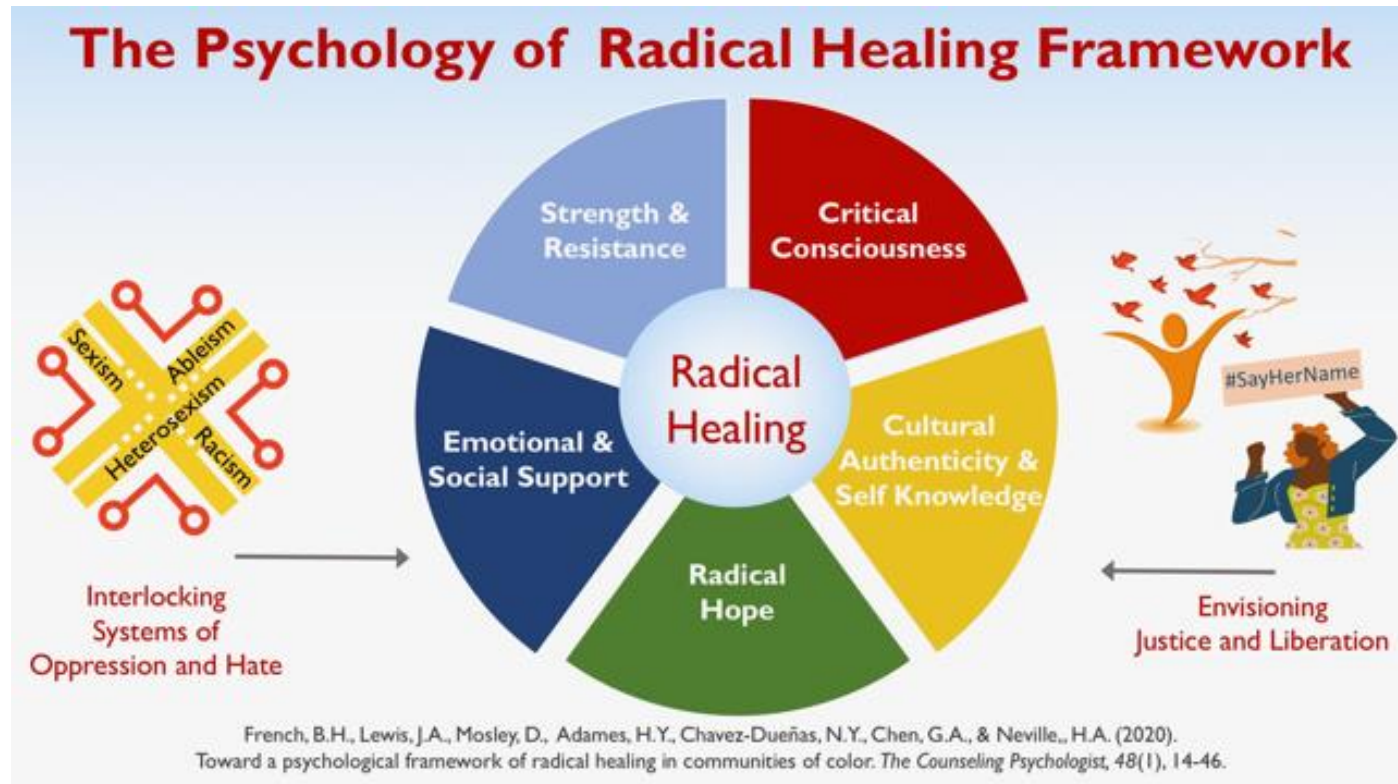
- Interventions that consider the multiple layers of trauma exposure that could prevent health decline
 - Radical healing in Black communities that utilize collectivism, activism, as well as strength and resilience (Grills, Aird, & Rowe, 2016)
- Healthcare providers as important advocates for social justice (Quiros, Varghese, & Vanidestine, 2020)
 - Examination of systems that are perpetuating racial injustice
 - Potential for communities to engage in collective healing outside of current healthcare settings



Resources for Resilience, Empowerment, & Healing

- Culturally competent considerations for Black youth and families (Jones et al., 2020)
 - Attitudes and beliefs
 - Stigma, mistrust, experiences with mental health care, resilience
 - Access barriers
 - Transportation, childcare, work schedule, finances
 - Cultural strengths and risks
 - Racial socialization, racial identity, Afrocentric worldview, family/friends, spirituality
 - Experiences with racism and discrimination

Resources for Resilience, Empowerment, & Healing



Take Home Points

- In order to address racial inequities related to PTSD in Black American communities, we must acknowledge that trauma experiences for this population are rooted in oppressive contexts
- It is important for our conceptualization of traumatic experiences to be inclusive of racial stress and trauma
- Given our current socio-political climate and US legacy, it is important to think about novel ways to engage Black American communities around therapeutic interventions for PTSD and racial trauma
- Ongoing self-assessment about our comfort addressing topics of race and our role in fostering an environment that is safe for clients to disclose and process racial trauma is essential for healing



Reading Resources

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Thank you!

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