

Racial Stress and Self-Care

Parent Tip Tool



How race-related stress affects you and your relationship with your child

What effect does racism have on your health and wellbeing?

Not only does racism impact you as a parent, it can also impact how you interact with your children. Experiences of racism build on each other and can chip away at your emotional, physical and spiritual resources as a parent, contributing to race-related stress. Race-related stress can make it hard to have the space needed to take care of yourself as a parent, which reduces the emotional space you need to adequately take care of your children.

Racism can impact parents emotionally, physically and spiritually.

- **Physical effects** can include increased hypertension, illness, and risky behaviors such as substance use.
- **Emotional effects** can include depression, anxiety, anger, irritability and aggression.
- **Spiritual effects** can include a decreased sense of purpose, lack of connection with the larger community, isolation from larger social groups, and reduced involvement in communal activities that you enjoy.



Visit the RESilience Initiative website (www.apa.org/res) for additional resources on how to uplift children and youth through healthy communication about race and ethnicity.

Below are some potential reactions to racial stress or trauma:

- **Feelings of shame and lack of confidence** due to feeling that a situation cannot be changed.
- Reminders of the event, such as particular people or situations, can also trigger **strong emotional or physical responses** (e.g., crying or rapid heartbeat).
- **Feeling detached or a lack of trust for others** due to experiencing multiple losses or letdowns. This can make it very difficult to seek out help and to identify potential safe sources of support.
- **Difficulty controlling emotional responses** (going from “zero to one hundred”) can occur as the body helps you adapt to potentially unsafe situations, making you feel constantly on “alert.”

The body’s response to the experience of racism can make accessing resources to cope with the situation difficult. Race-related stress is unique in that it threatens psychological resources that are needed to cope and fulfill basic needs such as financial support, housing, access to jobs, etc.

When your body is in stress mode, it is geared up to help you and your child survive, which sometimes leads to impulsive decisions. If you live in a chronic state of stress related to racism, you can start to engage in *survival coping*. Survival coping can help you to deal with very hard or potentially life-threatening situations. However, if you continue to exist in this mode long-term, it can make it difficult to enjoy being in the moment with your child and can reduce your ability to feel safe and in control.

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What impact can racial stress have on your parenting?

Experiencing race-related stress can also impact the quality of parenting relationships in the following ways:

- **Imposter syndrome**
When you are exposed to racism repeatedly, you often start doubting yourself and can feel like you are an **imposter** in dominant culture settings or in settings where you feel as though you do not belong. Your inner thoughts might sound something like: “Am I being judged?” “Am I worthy?” “I got lucky.” “I only got this because I am Black.”
- **Being overly alert** (hypervigilance)
Experiencing racial stress can make you more aware of potential dangers and negative experiences that can occur. This, in turn, can make the experience of parenting even more stressful. When you interact with your children, you can sometimes be reminded of negative race-related experiences that you had when you were a child. This reminder can amp up emotional responses, or hyperarousal, making it hard for you to “keep your cool” and be open to flexible problem solving.
- **“Helicopter parenting”** (monitoring in fear)
These experiences of racism and unwarranted blame or lack of acceptance can make you want to protect your children so much, that you don’t allow them to explore in the way that they need to. You may shelter them from failures, which everyone needs to experience in order to learn how to manage everyday life. You may tend to be overly cautious or suspicious. Examples can include not allowing your children to have sleepovers or go to the park, even with your supervision.

- **Difficulty regulating emotions**

When your past influences your emotional state, it can affect your emotional responses to both big and minor stressors with children, such as when they misbehave. This, in turn, can lead to being overprotective or overuse of physical discipline, as a means of survival.

For children, having parents who can keep perspective (stay cool) when children are upset or misbehaving is very important. Likewise, it is important to stay calm when disciplining a child, otherwise discipline may go overboard. Both of these things can be hard if you are having difficulty controlling your emotions.

- **Avoidance**

Avoiding situations that are related to racism can be a needed strategy to survive; such as instances that may involve violence or threat to yourself or your family. Sometimes you may avoid reminders of past experiences due to the pain or discomfort they cause.

If you find yourself avoiding strong feelings or situations with your child that bring up painful memories, it may make it hard to show affection and support for your child. It may even make it difficult to know how to provide emotional support for your child during times of stress. For instance, if your child brings up their own experience of oppression or an event in their life reminds you of something from your own childhood.



- **Mistrusting others**

Racism can lead to distrust or mistrust of other communities. Internalized racism is when you begin to accept negative messages about your own abilities and inherent worth by the dominant group in society.

When you use society's norms to judge yourself, you can feel depressed, unworthy, and just not good enough. You are taught in many ways to take these feelings and paint them onto another group.

Intra and interracial violence, contention among disenfranchised communities or color, and the way the media conveys information about people of color, contribute to this.

This kind of coping can make you more vulnerable to racism, because on some level you may believe in racial hierarchy and difference when you belittle other groups. And when you show your children that it is right to discriminate against certain other groups, you make them more vulnerable to discrimination that they face.

- **Minimizing racism**

Racism is overwhelming, as is the history of violence. You are sometimes taught that accepting this and minimizing racism is the only thing you can do. But when you ignore racism, and accept powerlessness, you encourage your kids to internalize racism. This can lead to increased levels of depression, anxiety, and externalizing behaviors (e.g., engaging in risky behaviors, such as alcohol or substance use).

When you believe that you should be able to handle and manage it all without a break or without asking for help, you are at increased risk for health problems and can miss important cues about your well-being and safety.

- **Self-blame**

Experiencing chronically unfair and dangerous discriminatory practices due to race can lead to feelings of low worth. For parents, this can also lead to a questioning of your parenting choices and abilities.

- **Unbalanced racial and ethnic socialization (RES)**

Unbalanced messaging or communication about race and ethnicity occurs when you only promote messages of mistrust, preparation for bias, or only give racial pride messages to your children.

| Strategies to deal with racial stress and practice self-care.

So, what can you do to mitigate racial stress?

As parents, it is important to develop positive identities and share your cultural identities with your children. Positive cultural identity and advocacy are protective factors against racism, which can help to reduce and prevent racial stress.

There are many other ways to cope with stress and everyone has different preferences. Reducing stress can also allow you to model healthy coping strategies for your child. Here are some suggestions you can try.

- 1. Build or access a support network.** You are not the only person dealing with race-related stress and connecting with other people with similar experiences and feelings can help you to successfully navigate racism.
 - a. Talk with family and trusted friends specifically about racialized events that have occurred and how to handle them
 - b. Start or join a group with others who may have had similar experiences and similar interests, like a book club that reads books by Black authors, or spend time with other African American parents who have the same concerns you do about how your children are treated at the school.
 - c. Seek out activities that you can do with your friends or family (e.g., exercising, cooking, watching a family show or movie together, etc.).
- 2. Incorporate cultural foods, activities, music, books, and other traditions into your home.** For example, take some time for yourself to listen to music that reflect and promote your culture, that make you feel good about yourself.
 - a. Here are some song suggestions: Brown Skin Girls by Beyoncé, Don't Touch My Hair by Solange, Dear Mama and The Blacker the Berry by Tupac, etc.
- 3. Get some exercise.** It can be as simple as going for a walk and enjoying the outside; going for a run; a simple 5-10 minutes of stretching or yoga exercises; or joining a group workout session that fosters community. Being physically active is proven to help reduce and manage stress.
- 4. Take 10-20 minutes to practice deep breathing exercises or meditation.**
 - a. Here's a good time to incorporate Dr. Howard Stevenson's [mindfulness techniques](#) (**Calculate, locate, communicate, and breathe and exhale**).
- 5. Journal**
 - a. Take 5-10 minutes in the morning, before, bed or both to write down your thoughts and feelings and reflect on your day.
 - b. You can also write down positive affirmations or positive things that happened to you today.
- 6. Limit your media intake.** Be mindful of the media you take in and how long you spend taking it in. The media can be a source of race-related stress, through constant coverage of racial injustices and discrimination. Try disconnecting from social media and news for 15 minutes to one hour today and reflect on how you feel afterwards.
- 7. Seek out counseling/therapy** from therapists who you feel you can relate to or reflect your cultural values to discuss ongoing stressful situations, process complicated feelings, and strengthen your resolve.
- If spirituality plays an important role in your life, **use your belief system to cope with stress.** This could involve connecting with other groups at your church or individuals who share your spiritual beliefs, confiding in your spiritual leaders, or participating in your spiritual rituals (e.g., prayer, meditation).
- Take some time to **listen to a podcast** that you enjoy.
 - a. For example, [Therapy for Black Girls](#) podcast provides discussions with psychologists on a variety of topics, such as race-related stress.

