Coping with the Stress of Racism

Helpful Information for Teens

Racial stress comes from racism happening to you, or from seeing racism happen to others. Some teens have little racial stress in their lives, but other teens have a lot. Here are five kinds of racism that might be adding stress in your life:

- **Microaggressions**
  - are brief, sometimes unintentional acts of racism. Like when people assume things about you based on stereotypes, or treat you differently in ways they can deny.

  **Examples**
  - Someone says you are well-spoken or pretty “for a Black person.”
  - A store employee watches you closely, like they think you will steal something.
  - Someone assumes you are not American because you speak with an accent.

- **Individual racism**
  - when someone treats another person with bias, prejudice or hate based on their race or ethnicity.

  **Examples**
  - A landlord rents to a white family instead of a Black family even though the Black family applied first and their application was good.
  - A driver yells a racial slur at someone walking down the street.

- **Environmental racism**
  - when communities of color have to live in a worse environment, or one with harmful symbols or messages that they do not belong.

  **Examples**
  - Murals in your school only show white people.
  - Government policies haven’t provided resources to diverse neighborhoods; many lack healthy grocery stores.
  - Years of less voice in politics made communities of color more vulnerable to pollution.

- **Institutional racism**
  - is when institutions (like schools, police, or businesses) have rules that cause unfairness across racial groups.

  **Examples**
  - A school prefers to accept students who have participated in their unpaid internship program. Many applicants of color don’t get admitted because they can’t afford to do unpaid work.

- **Structural racism**
  - describes how racism is baked into the programs & systems that run our society.

  **Examples**
  - When schools are funded by property taxes, schools in wealthy neighborhoods get more money. This is one way poor students of color can struggle to get ahead.
Are there experiences of racism that have been causing you a lot of stress recently?

Most kids and teens will feel upset and stressed out when they experience racism in their lives. With the support of family and friends, over time, stress reactions usually get better, and some teens even say that dealing with racism has made them stronger and brought them closer to their loved ones. Below we list some common stress reactions teens have, and some ways teens have learned to cope.

Common reactions to racial stress:

**Stress in the body:** When scary or upsetting things happen, our body can get wound up. You might have stomach aches, headaches, feel tense or anxious, and then as a result, feel worn out later on. While some stress is harmless and might even help us become stronger, research has found a link between high racial stress and health problems like high blood pressure. Ideas below can help give your body a break from the stress so it doesn’t constantly wear you down.

**Post-traumatic stress:** Post-traumatic stress, or PTS, is when something extremely upsetting happens, followed by some combination of these reactions:

- **Re-experiencing:** thinking again and again about what happened, having upsetting memories pop into your head, feeling upset when you are reminded about what happened.
- **Avoidance:** trying to stay away from things that remind you of what happened, even when reminders aren’t really dangerous.
- **Negative thinking and mood:** blaming yourself or others for what happened in ways that are really painful to you, thinking really negative things about yourself, the world, or your future, feeling alone or less connected to others, being in a bad mood a lot.
- **Fight or flight reactions:** your body staying on high alert, getting startled or scared really easily, feeling so keyed up it’s hard to sleep, feeling really scared in situations that are probably safe.

You can get PTS from one or two really scary or violent experiences, but also from having too much racism and racial stress in your life.

**Mood problems:** Another reaction to racial stress can be feeling angry, depressed, down, or “blah,” feeling hopeless or helpless, having low energy, and not finding fun in your daily life.
Here are some ways that teens have learned to cope with racial stress:

- **Social support:** Talk to someone you trust about what is going on. This might be a parent, family member, pastor, barber/hair stylist, teacher, coach, or friend. You can ask them for advice, or ask them to just listen.

- **Recharge:** Spend time with family or friends. Do something fun or relaxing. This can help you reset and recharge.

- **Take care of your body:** Keep your body healthy by getting exercise and saving enough time for sleep at night. This can lower your stress and improve your mood.

- **Take breaks from racial stress (if you can!):** Take breaks from things that trigger racial stress (like muting certain hashtags, social media or turning off the news).

- **Take action:** Find a way to take action to make things better. This can be doing something that makes your own life better, or doing something that helps your community in some way.

When should teens consider professional support?

- Teens who are struggling with the impact of racial stress, or experiencing other mental health struggles, can talk to their primary care doctor, school counselor, or a mental health professional for more support.

- Teens can also explore the C.A.R.E. Package for Racial Healing: https://www.drishametzger.com/care-package-for-racial-healing

← Parents and other caregivers can use this QR code to get tips and resources for supporting kids who experience racism.