

COPING WITH THE IMPACT OF RACIAL INJUSTICE

When, once again, we face news that a person of color has lost their life at the hands of those charged with protecting the public, the impact is broad and deep. We may struggle with our emotions and deep concerns about injustice and discrimination against people of color that has persisted over many decades. How do we maintain our well-being as we try to come to terms with what we're seeing and feeling? Understanding your reactions and having strategies to manage the stress may help.

Common/normal reactions

The intensity and range of reactions we might experience can sometimes be surprising or feel overwhelming.

- › **Emotional reactions** may start with a feeling of shock or numbness. As the experience begins to register, the floodgates open, and we may feel unfamiliar or deeper emotions, such as: profound sadness, anger, outrage, grief, anxiety, and fear. These feelings may build in intensity or perhaps ebb and spike with repeated news accounts and disturbing images.
- › **Our thoughts** can race and strain to find a place to land. Many people find that they can't stop thinking about what has happened or have trouble concentrating. We find ourselves constantly drawn to news reports.
- › **Physical reactions** may be less expected. People sometimes can't stop crying or are unable to sleep. There may be a strong feeling of restlessness, as if you can't sit still. You might experience an upset stomach or a pounding heart or trembling. Sometimes loss of appetite or feeling deeply exhausted can be a response.

These are just some examples; you may react differently. But know that it is normal to have intense reactions in a situation as impactful as this. It does not suggest mental or physical health problems. It is the way that our bodies and minds respond to a difficult event. It is okay to feel what you feel.

Understanding reactions

These reactions are all part of a normal stress reaction. They tell you that this matters to you. For some people it can trigger memories tied to past traumatic experiences. You may find yourself reliving the emotions of those events.

While each person has their own lens, we're all affected. Whether we're connected by location, skin color, or just as people who honor the value and rights of every human life. Racial injustice can shake the core of our moral code and beliefs, especially when history shows a pattern of similar events. Those who live with systemic racism every day may feel buried by this undeniable, relentless truth. Destruction and disruption in the community can add another layer of difficult emotions.

For many, there is a push-pull between wishing the struggle and discomfort would go away and embracing the anger and sorrow as drivers of change. This tangle of thoughts, perspectives and emotions can be overwhelming.

It's important to honor these feelings and understand that they are challenging for a reason. While we can't control how we feel, we do have control over regulating our emotions. Doing this can help us to better manage what we're feeling and respond to it in meaningful ways. Targeted coping strategies can help.

<p>Co-opted thoughts</p> <p>While we do need information to process this experience, we risk being overwhelmed, flooded with our emotions, when our thoughts are shaped by repeated, graphic media accounts of each event. Putting yourself in the victim's place and imagining their fear and helplessness can feel overwhelming. This image can play over and over in your mind, intensifying your reactions.</p>	<p>Coping strategies</p> <p>Take control of your news exposure. Seek multiple sources to get a more accurate and complete picture. Even though it may feel reassuring to be tuned in 24/7, try to take breaks from it to bring your emotional temperature down.</p> <p>Shift your thoughts. Mental images can trigger the same level of stress as the actual situation. Look for activities that can draw your thoughts to a neutral place for a time. Turning away doesn't mean you don't care, it's simply a way to bring stress levels down.</p>
<p>Fear of the unknown</p> <p>We all come with a hard-wired threat response. Lethal events of racial injustice have the power to trigger it repeatedly. From the fear that we or loved ones are at risk, to the worry that there will never be meaningful change. Seeing footage of chaos and destruction can add another type of fear. All the unknown "what ifs?" can fuel an unhealthy level of uncontrolled anxiety. It's important to do what we can to address worries and stop feelings of freefall.</p>	<p>Coping strategies</p> <p>Take steps to feel safe. Take precautions specific to the risk in your community. Check in with family and friends to confirm that they're okay or make plans to bring them to a place of safety.</p> <p>Focus on what you can control. We can only manage the "here and now," not all the "what ifs." Look for what is within your power right now. It might be just managing your emotions and stress levels or reaching out for support.</p> <p>Remind yourself of positive actions being taken. Seek out stories about constructive and hopeful responses to rebalance.</p>
<p>Trying to make sense of it</p> <p>We may find ourselves questioning life's meaning in a world where injustices keep repeating themselves. We try to make sense of events that feel so senseless. For some, this results in a sad and angry validation of their life experiences. For others, it's dissonant and confusing. We can all be left with stressful, unanswerable "Whys?" Focusing on questions without answers can leave you feeling powerless and unable to move forward.</p>	<p>Coping strategies</p> <p>Change your perspective. It may be helpful to ask a different question: "How can I respond to this in a meaningful way?" The answer might be marching, painting a mural, engaging with public officials or getting involved in a group that supports change.</p> <p>Learn more. Educating yourself about systemic oppression – past and present – can bring greater understanding and offer solutions to support change. Becoming familiar with movements and organizations that are working for change can help you determine how you can take meaningful action.</p>
<p>Desire for action</p> <p>The combination of powerlessness and outrage can set off extreme feelings of stress. Ongoing investigations and legal proceedings may deepen those feelings. It can spark a need to make the world sit up and take notice. We can feel a strong urge to do something, but struggle to know what that is.</p>	<p>Coping strategies</p> <p>Turn negative thoughts and reactions into constructive acts. This honors those we've lost and can help channel your emotions. Many find that supporting others and investing energy into making a difference can help redirect the power of anger in positive ways.</p> <p>Speak up; don't be silent. Use your voice to support racial justice on social media, with friends, family, at work, and in the community.</p> <p>Listen to understand. It may not seem like an action, but it is. Challenge yourself to really hear without defending your viewpoint. Allow the discomfort and strive to be open to learning.</p>

Taking care of yourself

The reality is that this is hard on many levels.

There's no easy way through it. There may be additional issues that spin up out of this incident, bringing added stressors. There may be ongoing developments that cause distress. You may be faced with opinions, comments, or actions from others that increase stress. This may be on social media, but it may be from friends or family as well. It's important to take care of your well-being as you find your way.

There's no right or wrong way to feel, nor is there one right or wrong way to feel better.

There are rarely easy answers to our many tough questions. It can feel necessary to hold onto anger. You may need to cry, grieve, vent. Give yourself permission to feel good or happy too. It's okay to be where you are right now. Remember, physical activity can be one of the best ways to ease some of the emotional stress you may feel.

Know that it will take time to process and find your balance. For some, it can be helpful to rely on regular routines, others might need to take a "time out." Being actively involved in the movement for change may be the most helpful for some. Do take time to reflect. Journaling your thoughts, feelings, and experiences or talking about them with others can be a useful way to reflect and release. A professional counselor may be able to suggest strategies tailored to your needs and experience. Recognize that the impact of this incident may never completely go away, but you can manage your emotions and stress.

Be aware that living with other, ongoing stressors can make it more difficult to manage your reactions. A major stressor, such as the restrictions and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic could be a significant factor.

Be good to yourself – physically and emotionally. Turn to the positive coping skills and strengths that have gotten you through hard times in the past. Be patient with yourself and get the support you need.

It is important to seek help if your reactions to the event feel unmanageable, continue long term, or become overwhelming. Consider reaching out for professional support.

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