

Introduction ([00:03](#)):

Thank you for joining us for today's webinar, Coping with Racial Trauma, brought to you by Cigna. Please note that copies of the presentation slides and handouts are available for download in the drop down box on the lower left side of the player window. Our presenter today is Dr. Gladys Smith.

Introduction ([00:24](#)):

Dr. Smith is a psychotherapist specializing in individual, couples, and family therapy with over 20 years of experience. She is a graduate of California Southern University, Washington University, and University of Missouri, and currently works as a private practitioner serving a broad spectrum of clients. Among her areas of expertise are trauma, addiction, sexual assault, depression, anxiety, stress, military issues, couples and marriage difficulties, and eating disorders. Dr. Smith has presented at national conferences and to general audiences, speaking on a wide range of topics.

Introduction ([01:00](#)):

And now, Dr. Gladys Smith.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([01:05](#)):

Hello, everyone. Thank you for joining us today.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([01:09](#)):

Our lives are intertwined with those of our neighbors, our country, and even the world. When a member of our community once again dies at the hands of those charged with protecting the public, it's heartbreaking to witness and it leaves us with renewed trauma. We think of our personal wellbeing, but also have deep concern tied to social justice and the discrimination that has persisted unchanged over decades. Quite frankly, we recognize that these are challenging times for many, for many reasons. All of these issues are important, and we must continue having meaningful dialogue about all of it.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([01:54](#)):

Our focus today will be on the psychological impact of these events, and how to maintain our wellbeing as we try to come to terms with what we are seeing and feeling. We'll talk about strategies that can help you process and respond to these feelings, and discuss ways to manage stress and to move forward to navigate during these challenging times.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([02:17](#)):

Next slide. We react on many different levels. Feelings, thoughts, and physical reactions. The intensity and range of these reactions may, that we experience, can be surprising and oftentimes overwhelming. The reality is, is that everything about these situations, these points, so the, point to the potential to strong feelings, strong emotions, and it leaves us struggling to know what to do and how to respond.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([02:52](#)):

It's interesting, because acutely, when something happens, we respond in a way. After it happens, a prolonged period post, we'll have reaction. But then there are things that keep happening in our society and to us as people of color that are ongoing. And so today we talk about the psychological impact and the physical impact, impact.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([03:18](#)):

The first part of this slide says feeling. They can be intense, fluid, or all over the map. Whatever you are experiencing is what you are experiencing. There is no right or wrong. Our emotional act, reaction, may have started with feelings of shock or numbness, and as the experience begins to register, the floodgates open and you may find yourself with unfamiliar, in unfamiliar territory with deeper emotions. Profound sadness, anger, outrage, grief, anxiety and fear. What we are experiencing, again, is collective trauma and collective grief.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([04:01](#)):

There are several key words. Collective means together we're experiencing it, we're seeing it, we're feeling it, in our homes and our community. And trauma and grief again. The loss of an individual. Our thoughts can race and strain to find a place to land, 'cause that's what our mind does. We wander. We try to figure things out and make connections. Many people find that they can't stop thinking about it or have trouble concentrating. We find ourselves on, constantly drawn to news reports, looking over and over and over, as if something's gonna change. Our physical reactions may be less expected. People sometimes can't stop crying, or have an inability to sleep. There may be strong feelings of restlessness or if they can't, sometimes they just can't be still. An upset stomach, or a pounding heart, or trembling are very common.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([04:59](#)):

There is a gentleman by the name of Rims, Resmaa Menaken, and he is from the Minnesota area. He's a psychotherapist. He wrote a book called My Grandmother's Hands. It talks about healing racial trauma, our topic today. He says that sticking with the discomfort. The body's design is to protect itself and to slow down, but when we try to keep going, we have this dissonance in our body and in our mind. Trauma is about being stuck, and being, and racial trauma is about being stuck in something that you can't get out of. You can't get out of your color. You can't get out of your history. But some of the things that we're gonna talk about today, which are coping skills that can help you deal with those intense feelings.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([05:52](#)):

Mr. Menaken says that racialized trauma affects our bodies. The slide says that it is your feelings, your thoughts, and your reaction. They, you know, we have to learn to deal with those. We have this thing, it's called the window of tolerance. You've heard people say you get on my last nerve. Your grandmother may have said it. Your mom may have said it. Your wife may have said it. Your brother. Somebody has, has said that and you've heard it, said that you get on my last nerve. Well we actually do have a last nerve.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([06:21](#)):

We have this thing called the window of tolerance, and what it does, it explains how trauma, whether it be racial, collective, of collective grief, affects our window of tolerance. So window of tolerance means that last nerve, how much pressure you can take, how much heat can the pot take before it either boils over, which is hyper-arousal, or it simmers all the way down until it's so cold that it's, you're spaced out. You're zoned out, you have numb, frozen feeling, your body wants to just shut down. We respond in many different ways. And remember I said that there's no right or wrong.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([07:03](#)):

But that it your way, how you respond to a situation. When you're in hyper, hyper-arousal, you're anxious, you're angry, and you're out of control. You can't make good decisions when you're out of control, and you can't make good decisions and act in a responsible way when you're hypo-aroused, because you don't wanna move. But it's understanding that you go through a range of emotions, which is the most important thing.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([07:30](#)):

Next slide. Understanding your reaction allows you to make better decisions. Your reaction may be intense even if you didn't have a personal connection. But somehow, some way, we have a personal connection to what's going on, because it's about racial trauma. Our race, what has happened to our race. History of other incidents and personal experience can compile feelings. If you've ever been marginalized, my, experienced microaggressions, discrimination, prejudice, on the job, off the job, in your home, in the church, in areas where you frequent, you know exactly what I'm talking about.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([08:14](#)):

The aftermath adds layer upon layer and layer of emotional experience. Now, one of the resources that I can tell you about now, uh, rather than later, is a self care wheel. Understanding where you are in this whole process. There's a guy by the name of Dr. Stephen Porges. He has a theory, and that theory is called the polyvagal theory. The vagus nerve is the 12th cranium nerve and it, it touches all the organs in your body. He says that, he describes the, the human autonomic system in three ways. And this is dismantling how to understand what you're feelings are.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([09:00](#)):

The first one is we are safe. We feel good. We engage with people. We talk with others. I see you, you see me. We're engaging. But when we have any indication of a threat, we mobilize to meet that danger with either flight or fight response. We wanna run away. We wanna hide and not deal with it, or we wanna stay and fight. It's a visceral response.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([09:31](#)):

The third way that he says is that when we're overwhelmed by threat, we survive by mobilizing our autonomic nervous system. Now that, it just rolls right, right in. It's autonomic. It has two parts to it, the sympathetic and the parasympathetic. The sympathetic is that alert fight or flight. The parasympathetic is what we call the rest and digest. Safe and calm. And at the end, I'm gonna, um, teach you some tools to help you activate that parasympathetic nervous system.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([10:04](#)):

The slide says the elements of this situation, whatever it is, come together in a challenging mix of loss, grief, anger, outrage, sorrow, and fear. We can't expect ourselves to not have a strong reaction to what's going on, but what happens when we're hypo-aroused is that we get that numbness. We don't even know what we're feeling. Racial trauma can be triggered by violence, injustice, and a lack of unfairness in the world. The tragedy is compounded by the fact that history, recent and past, show a pattern of similar events. It's hard to escape the sense of outrage and sorrow that's happened over and over and over again.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([10:50](#)):

For those who've personally faced systemic inequalities, this may be less of a revelation. The aftermath, the post, the ongoing, throughout history, a deeper need for justice and resolution has compelled people to exercise their constitutional rights to march, to speak out against it. But the scary part is that's when the violence comes in. I talked about that overwhelming desire, that fight, uh, process that occurs. Harnessing that is extremely important. Being heard is extremely important.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([11:31](#)):

Next slide. Coping op, co-opted thoughts. Shifting your perspective. Extremely important if you want to take action. The intensity and the broad impact of unfolding crisis demands our attention. We can't ignore or forget it. We have to do something. While we do need information to process the experience, we risk being overwhelmed, flooded with emotion. Shifting your perspective as the slide says, hearsay and some social media, uh, and mainstream media resources can increase your anxiety, increase your fear, increase your desire to reach for something to self medicate.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([12:22](#)):

We crave for information, but there can be a value to taking large breaks. Listening to the news in the morning, and maybe listening to it in the evening. Having one day that you listen to it, or one particular time. You know, the news repeats itself like every 15 or 20 minutes. You watch uh, an hour long show, and you've seen the same thing three or four different times. So the thing is watch the top of the news or the end of the news. Find a way that you're not ingrained in the hearsay and the social media over and over again. What I've found some people do, is they'll listen to the television, they'll get on their, um, they'll listen to, um, the radio sometimes, and then they'll get on social media.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([13:05](#)):

Limit your exposure. Engage in something meaningful that brings your focus and energy to something else for a short time. Our images and the things that we allow to be our images, as the slide says, mental images and your imagination have the power to trigger the same stress response as you would feel if you were in the actual situation. So it's not just watching the killing of George Floyd, or this weekend, Rashad Brooks. It's actually feeling like you're there. Your heart is racing. It's hard to swallow. Your stomach isn't digesting as it should. You have a cognitive reaction, and then you have a physical reaction, and it is important to understand that both of those things occur.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([13:56](#)):

Next slide. The fear of the unknown ... is scary. But what's gonna happen next. I heard a reporter the other day say, "We're all waiting, holding our breath, waiting for what happens next." The intensity and the impact of these crises has us thinking about what's gonna happen next. We're also managing a level of anxiety. We ruminate, thinking about something over and over again. Worrying about our safety and our wellbeing. We try to teach people, when we teach them about trauma, is feeling safe and being safe are two different things. Making sure that you are safe, making sure that you check in with your friends and your family, making sure that you are safe.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([14:49](#)):

But also knowing that you're safe, and that you can change the channel. You can cut off the television. You can cut off the radio. Remind yourself of positive actions that are ongoing as well. Focus on what you can control. You know, things that you can control is how, what happens after you respond, what happens after you see something or hear something, or experience something. Those are things that

you can control. Often times we can't control what they, what happens. Those individuals that are practicing their constitutional right by marching are taking action in a positive way.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([15:28](#)):

One of the things that you can do to take, uh, safety steps is to give yourself a sense of control. Monitor the situation. Learn about the true level of risk for yourself, as communicated by local authorities. Being aware of what's going on in your environment. Figure out how you can, um, you know, get your basic needs met, and if this is impacting your current situation. Check in with your friends and family. Remind yourself that positive actions are part of this too.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([15:58](#)):

Positive actions are you being engaged in the community, being engaged with your family, doing what you can do, also knowing that there is a pandemic out as well. Being safe, wearing your mask, keeping social distance, but being engaged. You can be involved, but you have to do the first thing first, is to take your temperature and understand where you are. It lessens the fear of the unknown.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([16:28](#)):

Fear of the unknown is part of our hardwired threat response. Remember that fight or flight that I talked about? Making sure that you take a breath, ah, whenever you can. Making sure that you understand what's really happening, that you're engaged in watching the television for 15 to 20 hours. You're sitting there watching television over and over again, the same thing over and over, when there are things that you could do, like pull out a coloring book, pull out a journal, start to write in that book. Contact others, do a FaceTime, write letters, something that we stopped doing. Resources are about of what we can do without focusing on social media and hearsay.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([17:10](#)):

Next slide. Trying to make sense of all of this is where we're at, and why we're offering this workshop. Try to understand what is happening. What happened? I can't believe this. Now, in the stages of grief, one of the, one, one of the first aspects of it is disbelief and denial. This can't be happening. Consider how to respond in a meaningful way. Understand what's going on. Try to understand what's going on. Those who are not African American, Black, or part of the communities of color, can educate themselves.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([17:46](#)):

Couple of resources that are really helpful and they help you understand the historical connotations are Henry Louis Gates junior's book, America Behind the Color Line. And it's just one of many. The other one is, uh, The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander. Allows you to understand the history of how we've got to where we are today, with mass incarceration, drug laws, policing, the enactment of policing. Understanding all of that past helps you understand your reaction and people's reaction to what's going on right now.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([18:25](#)):

One of the things that some, uh, organizations are doing are purchasing two little books, the Little Book of Racial Healing and the Little Book of Race and Restorative Justice. And reading them as a group, having talking circles in your churches in, and the individuals in your community, so that everybody gets it. Some of the topics in the, in the two books include understanding restorative justice, trauma healing

strategies, things like seeking physical and spiritual and emotional safety, creating nurturing and loving relationships, engaging in spiritual faith based activities, creating opportunities for physical and spiritual and emotional release, taking risks for those who have been labeled the other. That means connecting with individuals that are not of the same race as you to understand what they're going through so that you can, they can understand what you're going through, and then we can reach a healing.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([19:20](#)):

Participate in joint projects. There's a resource called, uh, Educators for, uh, for Social Justice. That group is here in St. Louis, but they have it in every city, every state, and it helps educators, who can be of any persuasion of education, come together to figure out how we educate ourself and educate the world.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([19:41](#)):

Get familiar with the movement. Understand why Black Lives Matter is an important entity. Understanding the history of the NAACP. Understanding the social and social services organizations that are in your area.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([19:57](#)):

But I think the most prolific thing that all of us can do is understand that focusing on unanswerable whys can leave us feeling powerless and unable to move forward, and it is about moving forward. It may be helpful to ask different questions, and different questions of different people. 'Cause sometimes we think we have all the answers, but in actuality, all we have is what we have and what we know.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([20:25](#)):

Trying to make sense of all of this, for those who live in the history every day, it can be valuable to be familiar with the movements. And I say that again, and I said it earlier, but it really is important to understand what's going on with the history so that we understand what's going on with the here and now.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([20:48](#)):

Next slide. Direct strong feelings. There's a way to channel your anger into constructive acts. Support others in meaningful ways. Allies have an opportunity to use their privilege to advocate for justice. Use your voice to support the community. This might be anything from social media platforms with our friends and family, conducting a Zoom, conducting a FaceTime, educating those who want to be educated. The combination of outrage and powerlessness, of on which is our basic level is hardwired, anger can spark a need to make the world sit up and take notice. You know, a gentleman said to me the other day, he said, "Well, if people threw, if we threw cotton balls, you know, they wouldn't get it." But there are things that are a step above cotton balls without putting fires, or, uh, danger, endangering others.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([21:46](#)):

It's about taking productive action. Channeling our anger, understanding our anger, and find support in others. Investing energy into making a difference can change your emotional temperature. Just by taking a breath first, recognizing where you are so that you're able to move forward with vigor, and making sure that people understand what you've gone through and understand your impact, and why you're feeling the way that you do.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([22:24](#)):

Next slide. One of the most important things that doesn't happen often is that, um, you, you heard the saying you're as sick as the secrets that you keep, and unfortunately, that applies to our families, to our friends, and most importantly to our children. It is really important that we talk to our children, and to our families, about what's going on. Being open and honest. For parents, this is a big challenge. How do I talk to my children? What are some of the things that I say? What don't I say?

Dr. Gladys Smith ([23:02](#)):

Start by asking them what they have heard. What worries them. Encourage them to talk about their feelings, but you have to be comfortable about where you are in your feelings. That's where that resource of self care wheel comes in. That's where that resource of knowing what, uh, the who, the what, the when, and the why, where of trauma. Trauma is a serious injury. It's a shock. It's an emotional wound, an event or a situation that causes great distress and disruption. And remember, it could be right away, which is acute. It could be post, right, you know, months later, years later, or it could be ongoing, and that's what racial trauma is. Ongoing, an ongoing infliction of a wound that never gets to heal. And we have to acknowledge that, but the thing that we do have to acknowledge, most importantly, that healing is available.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([23:59](#)):

Let your children, just as you allow yourself, to know that emotions are okay. Share honest information about your, at their level, not at your level. Help them understand as a child. Reassure with words and actions. Talk about positive ways to respond. There's two resources that go along with this. One is if you Google belly breathing on Sesame Street, belly breathing, it's gonna come up with a great like five to seven minute, um, YouTube. And what it says ... I can't sing, so I won't sing it. But it, it says belly breathing, over and over, and it shows a lot of colors, but what it does, it engages your children into breathing. It allows them to know that when you're having difficult feelings, sometimes you don't breathe like you should, and that causes your body to react in a certain way. And sometimes all you need to do is just take a breath. So it teaches them belly breathing, but it also teaches you belly breathing.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([24:57](#)):

The second one is Sesame Street's new workshop that they have on race inequality and equality in the world. It is phenomenal. It goes over from a child's level of how to understand difference and likenesses, and how to be racially responsible, how to be socially, in, responsible, and how to engage with others. It's really wonderful. They've taken time to make sure that our children understand, because they are our history. You know, they are our, what's gonna happen to us really depends on how well they understand it. They are the change.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([25:35](#)):

One of the most important things that you can do is the belly breathing for them, teaching them and showing them that workshop from Sesame Street, but limit their exposure to news, news coverage, and talk to your children. Talk to your family members. For a child, repeated images can seem as if the events are happening right here, now, over and over and over again. You know, they have that magical thinking that if they come into the room, the, the room lights up. Or, if something happens bad, it's because they didn't do their homework, or they didn't put away their shoes. We have to make sure that we dispel that myth of magical thinking.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([26:13](#)):

Next slide. So taking care of yourself is making sure that you understand the realities. There's no easy, and there's no right or wrong way. It takes time to process your feelings and find balance in your life. Other ongoing major structures like we're going through with COVID and all of the things that have, that are going on, the world didn't stop because all of this stuff is happening. The world didn't stop with COVID. We just had to change how we responded to it, and oftentimes change our proximity, change how we work and what we did. And that's what the world is going through right now. That's what we're going through right now, and we're hoping to dispel the microaggressions, the prejudice, the discrimination. You know, all of those things are happening to us, but we have to relearn to heal and respond in a more positive way. In a more positive way.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([27:13](#)):

And that begins with making sure that we are okay. Our ongoing major stresses, understanding what they are and understanding how to react. There are a couple of things that you start to notice about yourself. Signs of too much stress include anxiety and worries, feelings of anger and frustration, irritability, that flat feeling where you just get so numb you don't feel anything, poor concentration, feeling overwhelmed, lack of enjoyment, use of drugs and alcohol, which has doubled they say. Uh, and I think in some instances they say it's tripled. You know, they probably don't have the accuracy, but they do know that much more money is being spent on alcohol. Binging on food, you know, binging on television. Anything that you're doing to an excess doesn't allow you to be in the present.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([28:11](#)):

Feelings of increased conflict, feeling detached from others, the loss of humor, a loss of sense of humor, communication difficulties, frequent illnesses, headaches, high blood pressure, muscle aches, constipation, upset stomach, sweating, inability to sleep, to stay asleep, or to go to sleep. Those are some of the signs of too much stress. Those are the signs of stress, but they're also acute signs of racial trauma. And remember, racial trauma, just like trauma, can be acute, it can be post, and it can be ongoing.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([28:46](#)):

Some of the ways to release and understand those feelings under pressure is to manage your stress. Manage your feelings and manage your stress. Deep breathing is one of those. As I said earlier, belly breathing is one of the most important things that you can do, because it allows that parasympathetic nervous system to be engaged. The second one is the 5-4-3-2-1 technique. You look around the room, and you notice five things. Look around the room and you, well, you don't even have to look around the room, but you notice four things that you feel. Three things that you can hear right now. Two things that you can smell or taste. Take a breath. Say one good thing about yourself, or one good thing about the world. 5-4-3-2-1 is a live saver, because it's, it's like a funnel. It starts wide and it gets really small.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([30:01](#)):

Belly breathing, as we mentioned before. Another one is heart breathing, breathing in for a count of four and breathing out for a count of six. You repeat this for six cycles. No one has to know you're doing it. No one even knows what you're doing it. But you are self regulating. You are controlling your emotions rather than being controlled by the external world, and that is extremely important.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([30:25](#)):

Saying pleasant words as you inhale, breathing in peace and breathing out calm. Breathing in calm, and breathing out relax. You can tackle tension by tightening certain parts of your body, and then releasing. Tighten certain parts of your body and then releasing, starting with the shoulders, starting with the stomach, starting with your feet and your legs. The idea is that you undulate between the tension and then the release, and then you start to more notice the release.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([31:03](#)):

You can write positive affirmations on a board. I remember looking in high schools, and they had this, um, project where they would put all these positive words in the bathroom on little cards, and every time someone could either take one or put one, put one down.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([31:18](#)):

One of the most important things that you can also do is just close the door. Take some time for a breather and escape for a short time from all the stimulation. Over-stimulation causes stress, and causes racial trauma and racial tension in an individual to over boil. To get overwhelmed, to get hyper- or hypo-aroused. That window of tolerance is not at a comfortable level. You're not able to engage with anyone as they are, but only as you believe them to be from what you've heard and seen, and your reaction physically and psychologically.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([31:58](#)):

Those are a few resources that you can utilize, um, to gather with your family, with your community. Managing racial trauma, managing trauma is possible. Because understanding how you are responding allows you to move forward in a more positive way. Not to engage in self medication, not to take the, the anger and frustrating out on another individual, but be more active and more proactive.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([32:27](#)):

The other thing that I mentioned is that it is extremely important to become knowledgeable on what the issues are and why we are at the state that we are today. Sometimes I think we just take the, the word of others, and we just go along with the flow. But understanding is most important.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([32:46](#)):

Next slide. You matter. Two words. Not just today, but every day. These are challenging times. These are times that'll call on our strength, our resilience, and our unshakable belief in our value and rights as human beings. The strategies I've shared with you today are just a few, but if you start to Google some of those things, it's connected to other things. You start to read some of the information, you start to learn that it's not about not feeling, or getting over this. There's small ways to bring your thoughts and feelings to a place where you can manage them, and doing this, you can harness the power and challenge them towards positive outcomes.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([33:43](#)):

Racial trauma is not gonna go away today. It's not gonna go away tomorrow. It takes time to address stress, depression, anxiety, all the things that go along with it. But knowing that you matter is the most important thing, and that we can move forward in a positive way.

Dr. Gladys Smith ([34:04](#)):

Thank you for attending today. Keep the dialogue going. Thank you so much.

Introduction ([34:14](#)):

Thank you, Dr. Smith. And ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for being with us today. That concludes today's webinar.