

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Re-traumatization and Coping with News Reports of Racial Injustice

Some BIPOC people may be experiencing increased feelings of anxiety, distress, and even trauma due to recent instances of racial injustice as well as the media coverage of the murder trial of former police officer Derek Chauvin for the death of George Floyd in 2020.

It can be difficult to balance your desire to stay informed with taking care of your mental health, particularly when details of an event, such as the video footage of Floyd's death, is once again highlighted in the news. This article explains trauma and re-traumatization, and offers ideas of how to cope in positive ways.

Understanding trauma

A traumatic event is any situation that causes a person to experience unusually strong emotional reactions that have the potential to interfere with their ability to function normally at work or at home.

How you react to trauma such as racial injustice depends on many things including how close you were to a specific event or if you have experienced a similar instance of racial injustice. If your present life circumstances are stressful or unstable, you may also react strongly to these news reports, even if you have not been directly involved in the incident.

Immediately after a traumatic incident, you may find yourself feeling:

- shock, numbness, or disconnection
- exhaustion
- fear.

These feelings may last a few days or up to a week. However, as time goes by, those feelings may return and you may experiencing one of these additional reactions:

- exhaustion
- difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
- a lack energy for normal activities
- difficulty concentrating on or remember everyday tasks
- feeling overwhelmed by the normal demands of work and home
- irritability with little things, such as noise
- increased use or abuse of alcohol or drugs, particularly in reaction to difficult emotions or for help in falling asleep.

What is re-traumatization?

According to experts, "re-traumatization occurs when an event or the witnessing of an event elicits symptoms of a past trauma." In cases of racial trauma, this can be a past instance of conscious or unconscious racism, bias, or microaggression (unintended actions or comments that cause others to feel insignificant or degraded).
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Studies have also shown that re-traumatization can be triggered by media coverage of incidents of racial injustice and from viewing video of incidents of racial injustice or bias. This triggering may lead to you experience the emotions you felt immediately after a traumatic incident.

Learning to cope

1. Give yourself permission to turn off the news. While you may feel it is important to stay informed about incidents of racial injustice in the media, remember that your mental health is also important. If you worry that you may be re-traumatized or you are finding coverage of incidents of racial injustice distressing, it is OK not to follow the news or engage on social media.

2. **If you do want to stay informed, set boundaries.** Decide how often you want to check the news or social media each day and stick to your plan. Creating some distance can help you minimize how often you are exposed to traumatic details such as video or witness accounts.

3. **Acknowledge difficult feelings when you have them.** If you are experiencing anxiety, worry, or other emotions due to re-traumatization, it is important to recognize that. Stop and let yourself acknowledge what you are feeling in the moment.

4. **Consider therapy.** If feelings of trauma are overwhelming or are preventing you from engaging with parts of your daily life, call your assistance program or another mental health professional for support. You may want to seek out a counselor or therapist who specializes in black or BIPOC mental health or re-traumatization. Remember, finding the right therapist that you feel comfortable with is important, so don't be afraid to stop seeing someone if you don't feel that they are helping you.

5. **Reach out to others.** Spend time with your friends and loved ones. You may want to talk to them about your feelings. However, don't feel that you have to if you are not comfortable. You may also look for support groups of people who have gone through the same experiences you have.

6. **Practice self-care.** Go back to basics and ask yourself, "Am I eating healthily? Am I drinking enough water? Am I sleeping enough? Am I exercising or moving my body every day?" Doing these things show yourself that you are important and a priority.