

You may be wondering ...
 How might highly publicized racial violence be impacting my students and what can I do to support them?

Any time there is a highly publicized incident of racial violence, students may be experiencing a form of trauma as a result of witnessing violence towards another individual. Adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 have the cognitive capacities to understand racialized violence and may be exposed to an incident repeatedly via social media.¹

What is trauma?

A **traumatic event** occurs when an individual perceives something as dangerous to themselves or their caregivers, or when an individual experiences violation of personal physical integrity. For children, **traumatic stress** occurs when their exposure to traumatic events overwhelms their ability to cope with their experiences.¹ Trauma and resulting traumatic stress can be both an **individual** experience and a **collective** experience, something that affects a group of people.² Trauma can take many forms. For example:

- **Historical trauma** refers to emotional or psychological wounds that result from a group’s traumatic experiences and can be transmitted through families across generations.^{1,3}
- **Secondary trauma**, or **vicarious trauma**, refers to the stress that occurs when an individual witnesses trauma that someone else directly experiences. This type of trauma can also affect the perpetrators of racial trauma, or those who inflict harm on another individual.³
- **Racial trauma** refers to the stress that can occur from directly experiencing or witnessing discrimination or racism at either the interpersonal or institutional levels. **Race-based traumatic stress** refers to the impact or pain that can result from an individual’s experiences with racism and discrimination.¹

Where does trauma come from?

Traditionally, trauma has been viewed through a **medical model**, which suggests that trauma results from problems with an individual’s mental health or behavior. However, there are also **social and ecological factors** that contribute to trauma and traumatic stress, including social inequities, institutional inequities, and living conditions.² By understanding these social and ecological factors, we avoid placing the blame for trauma responses on individuals, and we can better understand historical trauma and trauma that is perpetuated through inequitable systems.² It is important to be aware that schools can be a place where historical harm and trauma is replicated through systems, policies, and practices that harm youth of color.

Factors Contributing to Trauma ²	
Medical Model	Social Ecological Model
Mental Health Risks (e.g. depression, anxiety)	Social and Institutional Inequities (e.g. bias related to race, social class, sexual orientation, immigration status)
Behavioral Health Risks (e.g. substance abuse, violence)	Living Conditions (e.g. physical and economic environment)

How might this trauma impact students?

Students can display a range of responses to direct or indirect experiences of trauma. Some of these responses may not be recognizable as trauma responses, such as difficulty concentrating, substance abuse, or alienation from peers.⁴ Students may become fixed or hyper-focused on a traumatic incident as a way of addressing the anxiety they may be feeling.¹ Furthermore, research has demonstrated that identity-based discriminatory experiences, such as bullying related to ethnicity and race, are linked to lower academic motivation, engagement, and achievement.⁶ These effects of racial trauma are detrimental to student learning, achievement, and well-being. It is important to note, however, that ethnic-racial identity can be a protective factor in the face of this risk. Researchers found that ethnic-racial identity resolution, or a clearer sense of the meaning of race and ethnicity for one’s self-concept, is linked with adolescents utilizing healthier coping behaviors⁷ and demonstrating fewer depressive symptoms when experiencing discrimination online and in person.⁸

IN THE CLASSROOM



"I am more than my trauma"

A Healing-Centered Approach

A healing-centered approach:

- Involves addressing the social-ecological and systemic causes of trauma
- Views culture and identity exploration as a means to experience healing
- Is asset-driven, or focused on youths' existing capacity to develop their well-being⁵

The importance of identity exploration as a means of healing connects to the Identity Project's focus on ethnic-racial identity development, which further highlights the strength of the work you are doing to implement the Identity Project curriculum with your students. **There are many steps we can take to incorporate a healing-centered approach into our classroom when there has been a highly publicized incident of racial violence. Holding space for these incidents can be challenging for educators, as you may be processing your own responses to these events. However, not acknowledging these highly visible incidents could have the unintended effect of communicating to students that their pain is not recognized. As you navigate these conversations, keep the following tips in mind^{1, 5}:**

- To foster a sense of psychological safety for your students, **provide clear directions** for managing overwhelming emotional responses.
- **Recognize when you need help** and call upon supports in your context.
- **Validate students' emotions.** Some students may have difficulty expressing their emotions.
- **Engage authentically** with your students. Remember that you do not need to have all the answers.
- Honor and respect that *all students may have different reactions, responses, and perspectives.*
- **Build empathy.** You might start by sharing your own emotions while centering marginalized voices or experiences, which may allow young people to feel safe sharing their experiences. Provide opportunities for youth to name and respond to their emotions.
- **Encourage your students to dream and imagine.** Allow your students space to think about who they want to be in the future. *Remember that their traumas do not define them.*
- **Build critical reflection.** Understand the ways that systemic racism impacts your students. *Use this knowledge* to discuss the potential for leadership and transformation in your community. Take informed action.

BEFORE THE CLASSROOM

Take Care of Yourself

Adults need healing too. Make sure that you have taken the time to process your own reactions and responses. Your own healing can take place individually and in community with colleagues.

- You might set a timer and take 10 minutes to journal before engaging with your students.
- You might take 10 minutes before the school day to talk with co-conspirators in your building and draw upon your community of educators working to support youth and their well-being. When engaging your community of educators, take care not to place undue burdens on educators of color at your school.

Key Takeaway:

Highly publicized incidents of racial violence can be traumatic for youth and adults. By understanding trauma and healing-centered engagement, we can support youth as they navigate these moments. The Identity Project facilitates youths' exploration and resolution of their ethnic-racial identity, which is an important part of activating healing.

References and Articles for Further Reading:

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