



EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE REPORT

supporting EA professionals

Important announcement!
See page 4.

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23 years
of service!

Understanding and Dealing with Racial Trauma

By Dr. Kennette Thigpen

Racial trauma is the cumulative traumatic effect of repeated experiences of racism and discrimination, including exposure to media coverage of acts of racism and race-based violence. Any one of these experiences can trigger reactions of fear and anxiety or feelings of exclusion or rejection. Alone, they are hurtful and can cause the body and mind to shift into hyperalert or a discouraged and downhearted state.

Together, over time, they can build up into an enduring and damaging form of trauma. Each new event can trigger memories of past experiences, bring up painful emotions, and reinforce negative thought patterns.

These hidden wounds that Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and other minority people experience from repeated exposure to racism and discrimination are worn like weights. They can drag us down emotionally and impact our physical health. And each new cut can add to the pain.

What can Cause Racial Trauma?

The experience of racism and discrimination in our culture is pervasive, and racial trauma can be its toxic effect. Experiences that can combine to cause racial trauma include the following:

Day-to-day microaggressions— Statements like “What are you?” to a person with brown skin, or “What country are you from?” to a person who was born in this country, may go unnoticed by a White person making the unthinking comment, but they can be deeply hurtful to the person on the receiving end.

The almost unconscious glances and body movements showing fear or wariness when a Black person

walks by are also microaggressions. If these incidents were rare, they might be no big deal. But they aren’t rare, and they are experienced in the context of a culture with deeply embedded structures of racism that continue to favor White over Black and brown people.

Experiences of discrimination and bias— These experiences can start early: being labeled a behavior problem in school for simply being a rambunctious,

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young boy because of a teacher's unconscious racial bias, or growing up in a less desirable neighborhood because of the lasting effects of institutional racism in housing.

And they can continue through life: unequal access to higher education; being denied job opportunities or passed over for a promotion because of conscious or unconscious racial bias; encounters with police that are more frequent and more fraught with risk for Black and brown people than for White people.

The emotional strain of acculturation— Sometimes, the behavior Black and brown people adopt to succeed in a predominately White workplace or to fit into a predominately White community can involve hiding their true selves. They may find themselves acting cautiously, concealing their emotions, and controlling their reactions to racist comments. This can be an emotional strain that contributes to racial trauma.

Indirect experiences of racism— This includes exposure to media coverage of acts of violence against Black, Latinx, Indigenous, or other minority individuals. These incidents are shocking in themselves to people of any race. But they can be especially painful to people who have had related experiences of racism and discrimination and can identify strongly with the person who has been injured or killed.

An act of police brutality against a Black man or woman can trigger powerful, visceral emotions in other Black people. They see in the injured or murdered person someone who could have been their child, their sister or brother, or their father or mother.

Minds flash back to other, similar incidents where ordinary Black people have died at the hands of police or White citizens, and to experiences in their own lives where they have felt threatened and afraid, made to feel unwelcome, or dismissed as less than fully human. This empathic response to an indirect experience is called vicarious trauma – one feels directly involved even when this isn't the case.

What are the Effects of Racial Trauma?

The combined effect of all of these types of experienced racism and discrimination can build to toxic levels of stress. The body produces a constant stream of stress hormones to maintain a hypervigilant state in reaction to past and anticipated threats. Our minds remain on high alert as if we are in constant danger. And, in a sense, we are. Racism is real and it's all around us.

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Those feelings of stress and fear are exacerbated by a society that refuses to accept the realities of racism. Too often, our objections to microaggressions and acts of discrimination are met with defensiveness and denial, or even with rage.

The problem is in us, we're told we're too sensitive. Or there's another rational reason for what has happened that has nothing to do with race. So not only do we feel the pain of the experience, those feelings are often invalidated, which only makes us feel worse—more isolated, less confident, sadder, or angrier.

Racial trauma is similar in some ways to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in its effects on the body and mind. But unlike PTSD, the causes of racial trauma are ongoing. There is no "post" to the trauma. It does not end, at least not in our current society with its deeply rooted systems of racial bias and segregation. So, any healing or protection from the trauma must happen while the injuries continue.

Not everyone experiences racial trauma in response to emotional injuries of course. Some people even

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gain strength from them. They have resilience grounded in emotional self-control, strong social connections, and deep pride in who they are.

Among those who experience racial trauma, effects may include but are certainly not limited to sleep problems, increased alcohol or drug use, diminished sense of safety, trust, self-esteem and control, and chronic stress.

How to Heal the Wounds of Racial Trauma

When culture functions well, it buffers members from at least some of the disruptive impacts and consequences of collective trauma. Racial trauma is, in large part, an effect of cultural dysfunction—of entire groups of people being treated unfairly and having their experiences invalidated by the dominant culture. True healing requires the correction of these cultural injustices, but *individuals* can take steps toward healing while living in our imperfect world.

Restore pride in who you are. Learn about the positive aspects of your culture and heritage. Immerse yourself in movies, books, music, and art that demonstrate and reinforce those positive views. Seek out people who recognize your true strengths and value you for who you are.

Learn about your cultural history and the actions taken to make a better future. Oppression and injustice have caused generations of pain and hardship, but they have also fostered resilience and an enduring struggle for change. Learn about that history and the courageous actions and enlightened ideas of those who have led and continue to lead the struggle for justice and respect.

Connect with others. Social support is among the most effective emotional medicine, so it is important to build a social network. Having a core group of people who care about each other and support each other through life's ups and downs can help heal trauma and offer protection from further injury.

Develop a sense of understanding and acceptance of racial issues. This doesn't mean accepting racism as OK. It means accepting it as a reality, learning ways to deal with it, and figuring out how to take action for change. Talk about race with people who will understand these experiences. Racial trauma is often made worse by having your experiences of bias and disrespect ignored or denied by the dominant culture.



Editor's Notebook

For Editor's Notebook, see "Improving Bias, Prejudice has to Start Somewhere" at <https://www.writeitrightllc.com/blog>.

Discuss race with people who can validate experiences, share similar experiences of their own, and talk through ways to respond that counter the negative effects of racism. This kind of racial storytelling provides an opportunity to bring painful feelings about racial encounters out of hiding and to think critically.

Ask for help. The emotional damage from racial trauma can lead to unhealthy and self-destructive behaviors and thought patterns. A professional therapist who understands the pain caused by race in our society can help re-channel rage, challenge negative thoughts, and build self-esteem and resilience.

(In addition to the EAP, a helpful resource for Black people seeking a racially aware therapist is www.AfricanAmericanTherapists.com)

With assistance, it is possible to develop psychological, emotional, and behavioral resources that can act as a protective shield in the face of future indignities and devaluations. Spiritual help can offer much of this same protection by finding a faith leader or fellow worshippers who acknowledge and validate your pain and offer comfort and strength. ■

Dr. Kennette Thigpen is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW). This article is used with the permission of Workplace Options, a leading global EAP provider based in Raleigh, NC. The entire blog post can be found at <https://www.workplaceoptions.com/blog/understanding-and-dealing-with-racial-trauma/>

Quick Ideas

Tips to Improve Your Life

- Make goals realistic and achievable.
- Don't be afraid to make changes in your life.
- Stop using material possessions to make you feel better.
- Start crossing off things on your bucket list.
- Learn to live in the present. ■

Source: Alexander Green, author of The Secret Shelter Island: Money and What Matters.

Keep Employees from Zoning Out in Zoom Meetings

By Cynthia Spraggs

The coronavirus changed the world into a planet of remote workers, but months into the pandemic some companies and individuals are still grappling with the challenges of working apart. Employees have more distractions at home, and some can find it harder to focus.

Drawing from experiences I have had advising companies on how to work remotely and maintain performance, these are some tips on getting the most out of online meetings:

Flex your virtual meeting time. From managing hundreds of regional and global online events, I can tell you the maximum anyone should be in an online meeting is four hours. Two hours is much better for a maximum. When they run longer, participants are going to experience significant muscle and eye fatigue, not to mention be tempted by the incredible distractions that come with working remotely.

Template everything. When managers ran meetings in a conference room, they could ban phones and have everyone's attention. With remote meetings, managers have lost that control. This is where templates for meeting agendas, action items, business reviews, etc., come into play. Make these available from a central dashboard and reinforce on calls where they are and how to find them.

Treat meetings like contract discussions. To accomplish anything of substance, set a strong agenda and stick to it. Get opinions from everyone. For the introverts not comfortable with sharing, consider implementing anonymous input forms. You'll be amazed how engagement increases. Like a contract, you need to document what the team decided, and what the priorities are. Put those in the meeting minutes, distribute, and follow up on them.

Don't drive yourself to distraction. Train yourself to cut down distractions to improve productivity. Turn off your phone and notifications. Otherwise someone

is going to ask you something and there will be dead air as everyone waits for you to respond. ■

*Cynthia Spraggs is the CEO of the virtual company Virtira, (www.virtira.com) and author of How To Work From Home And Actually Get SH*T Done: 50 Tips for Leaders and Professionals to Work Remotely and Outperform the Office.*

EAR Goes Bimonthly!

The year 2020 was a difficult one for many of us, both financially and in other ways. MOST importantly, I hope none of you reading this have lost a loved one to COVID this year, but if you have, our thoughts, prayers, and condolences go out to you.

Moving on to the matter at hand, starting with the next issue of *Employee Assistance Report (EAR)*, this newsletter will change to a bimonthly (every other month) schedule. This means a December/January issue will go out in early December; the next issue after that will be available in early February as the February/March 2021 *EAR*, and so on.

This change should actually be a good thing for readers, as some of you were saying the monthly frequency was getting to be too much to keep up with. This schedule means you will be able to keep up on important EA trends, topics, and news, while taking a breather in between!

Any questions about how this will work, let me know! ■

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SHRM Initiative Promotes Racial Equity in Workplace

Did you know that nearly half (45%) of Black American workers believe their workplace discourages discussions of racial justice issues? One-third (33%) of Black American workers do not feel respected and valued in the workplace. It's with polling results like these in mind that the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) has unveiled **Together Forward @Work**, a call to action to bring racial equity to the workplace.

Still, while the issues may be obvious, the solutions are complex, according to SHRM. Consequently, its multi-faceted approach includes:

Original research – The current state of American

workers' viewpoints on racial inequity in the workplace – the first of more data to come.

Blue Ribbon Commission on Racial Equity – a coalition of business and academic leaders to drive actions and solutions.

Ongoing learning, conversations, and collaboration – this effort includes conversation starters about racial equity and inclusion in the workplace. The resources are open to SHRM and non-SHRM members, with new ones added regularly to help drive action.

Read more here <https://togetherforwardatwork.shrm.org/> ■

Workplace Survey

Pandemic Driving People to Drink

The coronavirus pandemic is literally driving people to drink, a new survey shows, and the greatest spike in alcohol use is being seen in women.

During the early months of the pandemic, there was a 41% rise in how often women indulged in binge drinking, meaning having four or more drinks in under two hours. That translated into one in five women drinking heavily one more day each month than they had a year earlier.

“Our study shows that people drank more frequently, and for women in particular, more heavily, and with more negative consequences, during the initial stages of COVID-19 compared to their own behaviors from a year earlier,” said study author Michael Pollard.

In the survey, over 1,500 men and women were asked about their drinking habits in May and June. Nearly six in 10 survey participants were women, and about 54% were between the ages of 30 and 59.

The survey itself did not assess why and it does not prove that the pandemic is actually causing alcohol

use to rise, noted Pollard, a sociologist with the RAND Corp. He did offer some theories.

“The first possibility is that women typically report higher levels of depression and anxiety than men, in general,” he said. That may have made women particularly vulnerable to mental health issues during COVID-19, he suggested, “which is similarly being met with greater alcohol use to cope in response.”

Women also generally drink less than men, and so jumps in alcohol consumption “will represent a proportionately larger change for women than for men.”

Given other reports of increased anxiety, stress and depression resulting from COVID shutdowns, rioting, and concerns about the economy, officials said people are struggling with ways to cope and may turn to alcohol to cope and relax. ■

Additional source: HealthDay.

Diversity & Inclusion: Do We Really Know what it is?

The Merriam Webster Online Dictionary defines diversity as: “the condition of having or being composed of differing elements.” Closely related is the term inclusion, defined as, “variety, especially the inclusion of different types of people (as people of different races or cultures) in a group or organization.”

This is a good thing, right? Of course, it is. Few, if any, people would argue with that. Wanda Thibodeaux, a contributor to eHow, puts it like this: “Employers who strive for a diverse, inclusive workplace fare better than those who do not. Subsequently, diversity and inclusiveness in business is a major human resources topic.”

More than Checking Off a Box

This is a true statement, no doubt. But is there a difference between an organizational policy and what is actually put into practice in the workplace? It would appear so.

“Typically when we talk about diversity and inclusion, the expectation is to check off a box so we have by-the-numbers diverse organizations and can tell people we have just that,” states Eric Termuende in his online article, *Why We Need to Talk About Diversity and Inclusion in a New Way*. “We tell the public that we value diversity and have people of varying backgrounds and ethnicities.”

Inclusion & Belonging: NOT the same thing!

This means that a workplace can have employees of different races, ethnicities, or a certain disability, but these individuals may not necessarily feel like they *belong*. Put another way, we can have diversity in a workplace, but not necessarily inclusion, which means such environments may – or may not – be great places to work.

People want to *belong*, to be part of a work *family*. Working next to a colleague of a different race or culture might be a good thing, but these individuals might not have any more than stuffy, impersonal relationships with each other. Case in point, a large publishing company I used to work at. The firm employed more than 400 people, but its location in a small town



made it tough for HR to hire people of various races and ethnic backgrounds.

Even when they did, these persons typically didn't work there long. It might have made HR feel good to “check off” a certain race or culture on a box in a hiring application, but these folks sure didn't fit in very well. Bear in mind they weren't discriminated against, just that living in a town with precious few non-white people made it hard to relate to their colleagues' backgrounds. These individuals did not experience the same feeling of *belonging* that most people there did.

“Diversity” and “inclusion” goes beyond one's gender or the color of one's skin. It's a more nebulous concept than that. For one thing, I think these ideas need to start with the organization's leaders – bosses who are fair, nonjudgmental, not prejudiced, the type who practice what they preach. With leadership showing the way, true belonging can occur on all levels when values and beliefs are shared, and everyone feels accepted and welcomed.

Summary

This isn't an easy process to be sure, but it's been my experience that a diverse, inclusive company that goes beyond words and tolerance, and moves into action and genuine feelings of acceptance, is worth the time and effort. ■

Additional source: Employee Assistance Report.

Critical Mistakes Made by Supervisors

The following are eight critical mistakes made by supervisors (and other “bosses”) when dealing with employees in trouble at work:

Critical mistake #1 – Failing to set clear expectations or to regularly enforce them;

Critical mistake #2 – Letting problems you’re aware of fester before addressing them;

Critical mistake #3 – Failing to communicate with people about their problems;

Critical mistake #4 – Taking a given matter personally;

Critical mistake #5 – Playing “gotcha” with troublesome or difficult employees;

Critical mistake #6 – Waiting too long to get professional help, such as from an EAP;

Critical mistake #7 – Failing to recognize the importance of due process; and

Critical mistake #8 – Unwillingness to see a problem through to resolution. ■

Sources: Bob Gilson, a retired labor and employee relations director; FedSmith (www.fedsmith.com).

Opinion

Label Obsession Hurts More than Helps

The term “LatinX” has become an increasingly popular gender-neutral replacement for Latina or Latino, especially among younger populations. But in a world where we’re more polarized than ever before, El Salvadoran immigrant and film producer Laz Ayala says label-obsession is destroying our culture and pushing us further apart.

“It’s insulting. Another label is just going to further marginalize and divide the Hispanic community into sub-groups,” says Ayala, producer and author of the documentary and book *Illegal*. “As a country, we’re already so far apart that nothing gets done. LatinX is another trap to divide. For that matter, I’m an American. Period. Don’t give me a label.”

According to Ayala, getting hung up on political correctness often prevents us from focusing on

underlying issues in the Hispanic community, such as immigration and illegal employment.

While likely done with the best of intentions, I think Ayala makes an excellent point. When I started editing the now defunct *Job Training & Placement Report*, I couldn’t believe that “mentally retarded” was an accepted term. Fortunately, it wasn’t for long. “Cognitively challenged” seemed much better. But then this term kept changing! *What word are we supposed to use now? What term will definitely offend?*

It is very confusing to those of us “in the word business.” And who makes up these “rules” anyway? I suggest greater simplicity. Anything else is likely to hurt more than help. ■

Sources: Smith Publicity, Inc.; Personal view of Mike Jacquart, but not E.A.R.

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Thanking Employees for their Hard Work (Part I)

By Deb Boelkes

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of very public gratitude was showered on essential workers, especially those on the front lines of healthcare. That's a great thing (and very much deserved). But the reality is that to the organizations who count on them, *all* employees are essential. They keep business humming along at a time when so many others are going under.

Read on for some simple and creative tips for thanking your employees today.

Recognize and celebrate team members' accomplishments. For employees working on site, you might hold a socially distanced pizza party, for instance. And don't forget remote employees. For example, on a Friday, request that everyone finish up half an hour early

and host a Zoom happy hour. Get specific about how their hard work has helped the company and share a few things you have noticed that they do especially well.

Say "thank-you" on paper. The uniqueness of a handwritten note—especially in this age of emails, Facebook posts, and tweets—will not go unnoticed. Pick up some beautiful cards and write a heartfelt letter of thanks to your employees. There doesn't have to be a special occasion. Simple words of gratitude and encouragement are always uplifting. ■

NEXT TIME: More suggestions are presented.

Deb Boelkes is the author of Heartfelt Leadership: How to Capture the Top Spot and Keep on Soaring (Business World Rising, 2020, ISBN: 978-1-734-07613-4, \$19.95), www.businessworldrising.com.

Workplace Survey

Employers Offering Permanent Remote Options

U.S. workers shouldn't pack up their home offices anytime soon. After six months working remotely during the coronavirus pandemic, a nationwide workforce survey found more employers are offering permanent remote work options after the crisis ends than ever before, increasing from 20% in an April 2020 survey to 38% today according to getAbstract.

While the poll found employees are increasingly supportive of working out of the office, it also revealed rising levels of isolation and frustration with technology issues.

According to a follow-up survey conducted in September, of more than 1,300 full-time employees who are working from home in the United States during the pandemic, the percentage of employees interested in continuing to work remotely post pandemic increased by 9%.

Despite the good news of the U.S. workforce settling into working remotely, the arrangement is not without its

challenges. Nearly 67% of employees reported feeling concerned about their job security and 89% feel isolated, disconnected from their companies or distracted and less productive at times -- all increases since the April survey.

The survey also found up to 60% of workers are getting a range of support from their employers to ease these challenges, from technology and IT enhancements to skills training and learning opportunities

"It's becoming increasingly clear that widespread adoption of remote work is not going to be a temporary phenomenon during COVID," said Andrew Savikas, chief strategy officer at getAbstract. "As the pandemic drags on, employees and employers are embracing remote work, finding solutions and getting training to make it easier, and laying the groundwork for this to be a permanent change post pandemic." ■