RACISM AS A TRAUMATIC STRESSOR

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Defining Racism

- A system of oppression based on race (Helms, 2010)
- Attitudes and beliefs of individual or group inferiority based on racial categorization (Jones, 1996)
- The inequitable allocation of goods, resources, and services
  - Limits access to full participation in society
  - Reinforced by laws, policy, and cultural norms that allow for differential treatment based on group membership
Based on Jones (1996)
Experiences of racism

Response to racism and oppression

Psychological Functioning

Presenting Concern
Racism-Related Stress
(Franklin et al., 2006; Harrell, 2000; Jones & Neblett, 2017; Pieterse et al., 2013)

- For people of color, there is the additional burden of racism-related stress

- Psychological/emotional distress related to the experience of racism
  - Direct personal experiences AND observation or report
  - Daily microaggressions
  - Can be anticipatory
  - Exacerbated when others question or don’t believe the reality of your experience
  - Can result in racial trauma

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Racial Battle Fatigue
(Franklin, 2016; Smith et al., 2012)

- Daily “battle” of experiencing racial slights, insults, stereotypes, discrimination, etc.
- Stress is created because of the chronically hostile environment
- On guard so you can respond to each insult/attack
- Anxiety and worry, hypervigilance, headaches, increased heart rate and blood pressure, and other physical and psychological symptoms
Racism as Trauma

- Expanding definition of trauma to include racism
  - DSM5 traumatic event: “actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)
  - Responses associated with
- Some stressful racism-related events result in psychological and emotional pain/injury
  - Race-based traumatic stress injury (Carter, 2007)
  - Most severe racial trauma may not be physical threat/injury
Racial Trauma is Real
(Carter, 2007; Turner & Richards, 2016; Williams et al., 2018)

- Nightmares, flashbacks
- Intrusion/Re-experiencing
- Startle response
- Shame, guilt, self-blame
- Memory loss or dissociation
- Emotional overwhelm
- Memory loss or dissociation
- Over-eating or under-eating
- Substance use
- Body aches, headaches
- Confusion
- Increased vigilance
- Depression
- Numbing
- Loss of interest
- Irritability
- Avoidance
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- Hopelessness
- Intrusion/Re-experiencing
- Startle response
- Shame, guilt, self-blame
- Memory loss or dissociation
- Emotional overwhelm
- Over-eating or under-eating
- Substance use
- Body aches, headaches
- Confusion
- Increased vigilance
- Depression
- Numbing
- Loss of interest
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- Avoidance

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Psychological Responses to Racial Trauma/Battle Fatigue

- **Emotional** - Anger, helplessness, shame, despair, depression, anxiety
- **Cognitive** - Re-experiencing, numbness, hyperarousal, fear, difficulty interacting with members of the dominant group
- **Self-Medicating** - Drinking, Substance use, binge eating or restrictive eating
- **Relational** - Overcontrolling, arguing, fighting, disengaging or withdrawing
- **Physical** - Aches, pains, high blood pressure, migraine headaches, tension
Racism as Trauma

- Moderate to strong positive relations between racism and trauma (Kirkinis, Pieterse, Martin, Agiliga, & Brownell, 2018)

- When controlling for general stress, racism remains associated with trauma-related symptoms among Veterans and civilians (Kirkinis, Pieterse, Martin, Agiliga, & Brownell, 2018)
Coping with the Trauma of Racism

- People of color are unfairly burdened with the responsibility of coping with the painful existence of these oppressive experiences.
- Coping is like putting a bandaid over a splinter - helpful, but doesn’t get at the root.
- We need coping so we have the energy to resist oppression.
Therapy Considerations

Experiences of racism

Response to racism and oppression

Psychological Functioning

Presenting Problem
Interventions to Consider

■ **Acceptance of Emotional Responses**
  - Control has paradoxical effects
  - Flexible responding

■ **Social Support & Self-Care**
  - Friends, Family Members, Online Communities, Blogs, Books

■ **Valued living** (Graham, West, Roemer, 2015; West, Graham Roemer, 2013; Wilson & Wilson, 2004)
  - Who do you want to be in the world?
  - How are your actions consistent?
  - Research suggests buffering effect