

Recommendations for Districts on How to Facilitate Conversations About Race-Based Stress and Trauma 2.0

Definitions

“Racial trauma, or Race-Based Traumatic Stress (RBTS), refers to the mental and emotional injury caused by encounters with racial bias and ethnic discrimination, racism, and hate crimes. Any individual who has experienced an emotionally painful, sudden and uncontrollable racist encounter is at risk of suffering from a race-based traumatic stress injury. In the U.S., Black, Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) are most vulnerable due to living under a system of white supremacy” (Mental Health America).

Vicarious/Secondary Discrimination, or Vicarious/Secondary Racial Discrimination, “is exposure to others' unfair racial experiences which occurs when hearing or witnessing about someone else’s experience of discrimination or prejudice” (IGI Global, n.d.).

Microaggressions are subtle but offensive comments or actions directed at members of a marginalized group that are often unintentionally offensive or unconsciously reinforces a stereotype. This term can apply to any traditionally underrepresented group. For this document, we use this term to pertain to a racial minority.

[Tool: Recognizing Microaggressions and the Messages They Send](#)

Macroaggressions are “large-scale or overt aggressions toward those of a different race, culture, gender, etc.; contrasted with microaggression” (Glosbe.com). There are current conversations regarding the need for this term and the use of it. Current logic around this is that microaggressions aren’t necessarily micro (which suggests small or tiny) and that any form of offensive comment directed toward a member of a marginalized group can be considered overt by the victim.

Marginalization is the “treatment of a person, group or concept as insignificant or peripheral” (dictionary.com).

Intergenerational Trauma “is expressed when the descendant of someone who experienced a traumatic event presents challenging emotional and behavioral reactions that are similar to their ancestor or relative” (Ryder & White, 2022).

Historical Trauma “is closely related, as it is intergenerational trauma experienced by a specific cultural, racial or ethnic group of people. In other words, the root of our triggers can be as much — if not more — about the past than the present” (Ryder & White, 2022).

Introduction

Race-based stress and trauma results from the cumulative effects of racism on mental and physical health. This psychological and physical injury results from direct or vicarious discrimination, micro- and macroaggressions, marginalization and dismissal based on one's race.

The following guidance was prepared by the Kentucky Department of Education's (KDE's) cross-agency Trauma and Resilience Team, in partnership with colleagues from the Kentucky Department for Behavioral Health, Developmental and Intellectual Disabilities and KDE's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging Team. KDE is committed to its core values of equity, achievement, collaboration and integrity. As educators, we must commit to listen to those seeking to be heard and ensure that our young people of color and staff members of color are valued and safe in school and in the community. This document serves to help districts facilitate conversations about race-based stress and trauma. Race-based stress and trauma can be a result of events that have a negative impact on communities of color. These events don't necessarily have to be in the public eye. They can be day-to-day microaggressions or events that we don't necessarily hear about in the media, such as "I bet you are good at math" to an Asian student or "Is that your real hair?" to a Black person.

KDE believes that conversations about racial trauma and implicit bias are needed across Kentucky regardless of the racial makeup in our schools, districts or communities. Research shows that ignoring or avoiding race-related topics may lead to increased prejudice, while discussing these topics can reduce bias in students of color and white students (Gonzales, D, et al., 2022). Furthermore, "when students are aware of negative stereotypes about themselves, it creates stress that reduces their brain's capacity to focus on learning and undermines achievement from a very young age" (Gonzales et al., 2022, p. 1). The good news is that when students have a positive ethnic-racial identity, they tend to also have positive attitudes towards those from different ethnic-racial groups (Gonzales et al., 2022). According to Gonzales et al. (2022), "Schools can and should affirm and celebrate students' ethnic-racial identity and develop their knowledge and curiosity about others" (p. 2). Students' sense of belonging, which involves feelings of acceptance, respect and inclusion, plays an important role in social/emotional outcomes and having teachers who are caring and supportive is the most important contributing factor to students' sense of belonging (Gonzales et al., 2022).

The last few years have seen increased recognition of the traumatic impact of numerous events that negatively impact everyone, particularly communities of color. These events affect us all and we must address their emotional and traumatic consequences to improve the sense of belonging for all students.

Below is guidance to start these conversations:

What Can You Do for Your School Community (Staff Members and Students)?

- Show people unconditional acceptance, not tolerance, and recognize that many are hurting because of racism and oppression.
- If a large scale racially charged event happens, acknowledge it in an age-appropriate fashion and recognize the ongoing emotional response it may create for students and staff.
- Remind students and staff that it is OK not to be OK – that is, when difficult things happen, it’s normal to react by feeling distressed.
- Acknowledge that events in the community are not separate from the context of school.
- Create a safe space for dialogue; allow all voices to be heard and seek input to make our educational settings safer and more equitable.
- Acknowledge our own biases and seek to grow by participating in training on diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging, implicit bias, cultural responsiveness, and anti-racism. Provide and encourage these opportunities for others.
- Check in routinely with your staff and students. Explore their emotions and honor them; never dismiss.
- Examine student and staff voice data (e.g., surveys or interviews) that is disaggregated by different groups, which could uncover unseen inequities.
- Teach students, staff and all members of the school community how to be an upstander (when you see something, say something) when racism is witnessed.
- Begin efforts to implement an antiracist framework in your school and classroom.
- Teach resilience skills as a part of social and emotional learning and remind staff and students of their character strengths. [This chart is for adults. This chart is for students.](#)

Other Considerations:

Be prepared to offer a response to these events utilizing a [multi-tiered system of supports framework](#): There should be **Tier 1** instruction to students and staff members where we teach about cultural humility, equity, respecting people different from us, [empathy interviewing](#), etc., as whole groups. Identify appropriate **Tier 2** and **Tier 3** supports and interventions from behavioral health experts trained in understanding and addressing (race-based) trauma and equity. These supports should address the traumatic impact of systemic and structural oppression and racism and recognize their impact on individuals across the lifespan. Collaborate with these providers to ensure that supports and services are accessible to students, families and staff who are most in need. **Tier 3** individualized trauma-specific evidence-based interventions should be available for students and staff with more intensive needs.

How Can I Improve My Own Learning Around Race-Based Stress and Trauma?

- Learn about [disrupting dehumanization for boys and young men of color](#).
- Learn about the ways to address the [adultification of Black girls](#).

Considerations for Facilitating Conversations About Race-Based Stress and Trauma in Whole Groups (Tier 1) or Small Groups (Tier 2)

- Prepare by reading and processing [“Beginning Courageous Conversations about Race.”](#)
- Create agreed-upon norms that help keep the conversation respectful and promote psychological safety at the beginning of the conversation.
- Discuss psychological safety and ensure students can opt out of conversations if they experience or are concerned about experiencing a trauma reminder.
- Acknowledge what has happened and the pain and range of emotions many people are feeling at this time.
- Honor everyone’s participation and center on the humanity of those most impacted.
- Acknowledge there may be different opinions and set clear boundaries explaining that now is not the time for perspectives that are hurtful and could become trauma reminders to others.
- Use a [healing-centered](#) and [trauma-informed approach](#). Instead of asking students what is wrong with them, ask them what is strong with them or what has happened to them.
- Openly discuss what racism looks like and might feel like for the victim. Remember that racism diminishes us all.
- Explain that microaggressions may not seem like overt displays of racism, but to the recipient, they can feel like “death by a thousand cuts” because they happen so often and in so many ways and environments.
- Remember, when you are having these conversations, there will be a range of responses from students, families and staff, and even among people of the same race. Trauma is a unique experience. Never assume that one person represents or speaks for all members of their race or ethnicity; avoid tokenizing people for any reason, including race.

What Can We Do for Caregivers?

- Acknowledge the difficulty of raising children during times of cultural dissonance and the emotional response this creates for families.
- Acknowledge the pain that parents/caregivers are enduring because of either their own race-based stress and trauma or from witnessing graphic violence, excess negative messaging on the news and/or social media, and/or feelings of grief.
- Remind parents/caregivers it is OK not to be OK. Explain that they will need to remind their children of this and may need to say it over and over.
- Provide parents/caregivers with resources about how to have difficult conversations about race. We suggest starting with this piece from Teaching for Justice: [“10 Ways to Start a Conversation About Race.”](#)

- Offer parents/caregivers a safe space at school to openly discuss their own concerns. Model how to have courageous conversations that provide a sense of psychological safety for them.
- Remind parents/caregivers how to get outside help for children who may be at risk of hurting themselves or others.

What Can Staff Do to Take Care of Themselves?

- Acknowledge the pain of events that negatively impact communities of color.
- Acknowledge the pain that staff have experienced (particularly your traditionally underrepresented staff members) because of their own race-based stress and trauma or from witnessing graphic violence, excess negative messaging on the news and/or social media or feelings of grief.
- Remind staff that it is OK not to be OK; repeat this reminder over time.
- Provide staff with resources about the importance of taking care of themselves and paying attention to the range of emotional responses they may experience to events in their school, district, community and the world.
- Offer staff a safe space at school to openly discuss their own concerns and model courageous conversations.
- Remind staff to limit access to the media for their children and themselves.
- Remind your staff that while events that negatively impact communities of color are difficult, they are not new, and we must acknowledge that reality and be prepared to face the pervasiveness of race-based stress and trauma.

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Race-Based Stress and Trauma

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