

Psychological First Aid for Supporting Black Students

General Guidelines for Addressing Mental Health Needs in the School Environment

PFA is an evidence-informed approach for assisting children, adolescents, adults, and families in the immediate aftermath of a critical incident, disaster, or terrorism. PFA is designed to reduce the initial distress caused by traumatic events and to foster short and long-term adaptive functioning.



RESPONDING TO RACIAL TRAUMA

Racial trauma is defined as the mental and emotional injury caused by race-based traumatic incidents and other forms of violence towards African Americans and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). Children and youth may experience race-based traumatic incidents in various ways, including direct impact, indirect exposure, or through media outlets. Research shows that African American or Black youth, as well as youth of other BIPOC groups may identify with the people being hurt and may wonder if they will also be hurt or killed. This guide has been adapted to support students who are continually experiencing discrimination and repeated acts of racial violence and aggression that may result in racial trauma. The following strategies are offered to help you with supporting and nurturing your students.

LISTEN TO STUDENTS' VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION.

Encouraging dialogue about what they may have experienced or been exposed to lets students know that you care about their feelings and are available to listen to their concerns.

- Provide a designated time for open dialogue with ground rules, that includes respectfully listening to one another.
- Clarify any questions your students might have as part of this dialogue. You may need to have trained professionals visit your class to discuss racism or racial justice with all students regardless of race.
- Validate student responses by reflecting what you heard them say.

PROTECT BY MAINTAINING STRUCTURE, STABILITY, AND CONSISTENCY.

Witnessing acts of violence or aggression toward African American and/or BIPOC groups may cause stress that can be reduced by offering students a safe and affirming classroom/school environment.



- Monitor conversations around race and culturally related issues and explain the benefits of limiting media coverage that might trigger fear, pain, sadness, anxiety, anger, or a negative self-image.
- Believe your students when they say that they have experienced or witnessed discrimination, harassment, or bullying due to their race, and inform your school site principal or contact the Educational Equity Compliance Office.
- Increase exposure to positive representations of African American and Black individuals to guard against internalizing oppression (e.g., negative perceptions of oneself and/or other Black people).

CONNECT THROUGH INTERACTION, ACTIVITIES, AND RESOURCES.

A positive relationship with a healthy adult at home and at school is one of the most important factors that helps build resilience.

- Help students find healthy ways to express their feelings through creative arts, drama, dance, and other forms of self-expression.
- Encourage participation in age-appropriate activities and organizations that foster leadership skills through action and activism.
- Connect students with people who share their cultural background, experiences, and/or demonstrate cultural sensitivity.
- Become familiar with the school and community resources available to support your students and connect them to a mental health professional or counselor on your campus when necessary.

MODEL CALM AND COMPASSIONATE BEHAVIOR.

Students take their cues from adults and are influenced more by what adults do than what they say.

- Pay attention to your thoughts, feelings, and reactions regarding reports of racial trauma, discrimination, or community racial violence.
- Express empathy and hope for the future when students share their experiences following race-based incidents.
- Be mindful of adult conversations about race that may trigger anger, fear, anxiety, and sadness.

TEACH ABOUT THE NORMAL REACTIONS OF RACIAL TRAUMA.

Teach that it is common to experience feelings of anger, sadness, fear, and a sense of a shortened lifespan for themselves, friends, and/or loved ones.

- Teach students that asking for help is a source of strength. It is important for students to develop and utilize the skills to overcome difficult situations by engaging in help-seeking behavior.
- Explore various educational resources to better understand the history and resilience of African Americans and Black people worldwide.
- Provide your students examples of positive coping activities such as exercise, relaxation, mindfulness, or faith-based activities to buffer the impact of racial trauma.

