

Empowering Asian-Americans

Understanding the impact of racialized trauma

What is racialized trauma?

According to the American Psychological Association, racialized trauma can result from major experiences with racism, such as workplace discrimination or hate crimes, or from an accumulation of many small occurrences, such as bullying and microaggressions. It can affect a person's ability to sustain healthy relationships, concentrate on school or work, and feel safe. Many symptoms of PTSD may be present, as well as depression and anxiety.

How can racialized trauma affect Asian-Americans? They may keep their head down, work hard and suffer in silence. They may shut down and numb themselves to all feelings, creating temporary safety when they feel helpless to act, but that can lead to repressing positive as well as negative emotions. In the end, they may become muted versions of themselves. More importantly, racialized trauma leads to feelings of shame about racial and ethnic identity.

Things to Keep in Mind for Counseling Asian-Americans

1. **Don't minimize their racial trauma.** Racism against Asian-American communities is just as real as racism against other minorities. Many in the Asian-American community do not realize that they have been traumatized, or they have been gaslighted into denying these occurrences. But they may have suppressed anger and other emotions that need to be processed.
2. **The Asian-American Community tends to be honor and shame based.** Shame is inherent in Asian-American culture, but it may be heightened when they experience discrimination, bullying or aggression. The deep-rooted sense of honor can also put pressure on them as they strive to live up to the "model minority" myth.
3. **Beware of intergenerational trauma.** Many Asian immigrants come from war-torn countries or have suffered on their immigration journey. They tend not to discuss these experiences with their children, but this grief and pain can be passed on inadvertently. If you are counseling a first generation Asian-American, ask about their history, both before and after they immigrated. If you are counseling a second-generation Asian-American, look for patterns of inherited trauma that they might not even be aware of.
4. **If they go silent, don't assume there's nothing wrong. Continue to ask and engage.** Just because they say everything is fine, doesn't mean that it is. Asian culture emphasizes the importance of maintaining harmony, so they avoid causing any trouble by voicing their complaints. Their parents may have dismissed their experiences with racism, telling them to just ignore it.

Ways to help process the Asian-American experience

1. **Offer empathy and solidarity.** When you explicitly acknowledge their reactions to Asian-American racism, you offer meaning and safe spaces for them.
2. **Create space.** Invite them to tell their stories; give them an opportunity to use their voice. Asians are not likely to speak up unless they are specifically given the opportunity to do so.
3. **Ask many questions.** What is your family's migration story? What was your family's life like in your home country? What struggles did your family endure? Where do you feel seen and heard as an Asian person? How are you affected by racial discrimination?
4. **Bear witness to the grief.** Make the invisible visible. In order to mourn, Asian-Americans need allies to validate their experiences and let them know that they are seen. You can be that vessel for your Asian-American friends.
5. **Educate yourself on Asian-American history.** One resource is a 5-hour PBS documentary on Asian Americans that has a wealth of information on their history of oppression in this country.
6. **Encourage activism.** One way you can empower Asian-Americans to speak up is to bring their voices together so they can become a collective force for change. Asian-Americans historically have not been active protesters. We can encourage their participation by joining them in making their voices heard.
7. **Connect them to God, who sees their suffering.** Show them how He grieves with them as they try to heal from their pain. They might not have felt seen by their neighbors and friends, but God knows everything about them and what they have experienced. Also, experiences of racial trauma could have affected their view of self. Help them create mental images of God's character (as revealed in scripture) and imagine how he sees them: he made them in his image with inherent value, dignity and worth; he delights in and celebrates diversity. How you listen and relate to them can be a corrective experience that gives them a taste of God's deep love for them.
8. **Foster self-care.** In session, have them take time to breathe deeply and slowly. Encourage them to build habits of checking in with themselves, engaging in healthy, relaxing activities and building a supportive community where they can freely express themselves.

Anti-Asian hate safety resource

Bystander intervention to stop anti-Asian and xenophobic harassment:

<https://www.ihollaback.org/bystanderintervention/>