

Living and Coping with Trauma: The Unseen Force Executive Summary



On September 11, 2022, over 200 people convened by Zoom to explore how we might dismantle racism in our community with a focus on trauma, and in particular racial trauma. The session began with a panel presentation featuring two national experts on racial trauma – Dr. Jules Harrell and Dr. Kevin Washington. Then attendees heard about local racial trauma in video vignettes from three individuals. In breakout groups, attendees listened deeply to each other share experiences, stories and ideas. All reconvened to review the principal points made in the groups. At the end of the event, attendees were asked to complete an exit survey. These sources were used to create this executive summary setting forth what was learned and what can be done to address trauma in Southern Maryland.

Key Findings:

Awareness of trauma, in particular racial trauma, and its effects

Participants learned that trauma is an event or series of events or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening. Trauma can have lasting adverse effects on an individual’s mental, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being, and their functioning and development. Trauma comes in many aspects of one's life (i.e., economic, educational, and health as examples). Some people (Black, White or other) are unaware of their trauma. Many of us experienced trauma over the last two years in dealing with Covid. The pervasiveness and persistence of racial trauma (PEST – persistent systemic trauma) continues in our communities today. As initiated in Southern Maryland through enslavement and continued through 100 years of Jim Crow segregation, racial trauma continues today through systemic policies and micro-aggressions (a subtle behavior – verbal or non-verbal, conscious or unconscious – directed at a member of a marginalized group that has a derogatory, harmful effect).

The existence of research into aspects of racial trauma, especially generational trauma

Several areas of research on racial trauma were presented by the panelists. Many participants were unaware of the existence of this research, in particular, the work on generational trauma. This work indicates that trauma can be passed down through generations by modifications of the expression of genes. Generational trauma can also be transmitted through parenting practices, stories passed down from previous generations and emotional patterns of response. These mechanisms could help explain the persistence of racial trauma in Black Americans which started with the experience of their ancestors during the Middle Passage and was passed down through the periods of enslavement, Jim Crow and the current environment of repression and inequity.

Decreasing the effects of racial trauma

The fostering of resilience can be a powerful force in decreasing the effects of racial trauma. Factors in developing resilience in Black children include the encouragement of cultural knowledge and pride, and exposing the children to the real history of contributions of Black people. Community factors such as

exposure to other trusted adults through family relationships and community organizations are also important. Involvement in activities that give back to the community can also decrease the effects of racial trauma and can be facilitated through community organizations. Black adults can distinguish between when someone is speaking out of hate or ignorance. When someone is speaking out of ignorance, demonstrating tolerance through efforts to educate are often more effective for both parties. Factors where both White and Black people can be active are the honest sharing of stories and promoting the teaching of complete history.

Ways the community can reduce racial trauma

Attendees emphasized the importance of more open dialog with the community about racial trauma (what it is, its impact, and solutions to minimize the effects). This included more opportunities to listen to Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people's stories and understanding that these communities have significant fear and mistrust due to their history with racism. Public and private institutions need to be more aware of racial trauma, work to eliminate it, and make sure that people of color are better represented in leadership positions. More psychologists, counselors, and social workers are needed in the schools and community. Access to mental health services should be improved.

Communities should emphasize prevention, education, changing laws, behaviors and understanding instead of cleaning up after disasters. Faith organizations should take on a stronger role within and outside their buildings. Groups needing to focus on trauma include health providers, law enforcement, education and EMTs. The St. Mary's County collaborative effort among health, law enforcement and schools to address trauma is a good model. All should be aware of local Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color's history and its implications. This history needs to be taught in its totality including the unpleasant things we may not want to hear.

Ways White people can help decrease racial trauma

White people need to be more aware of their White advantage and their contributions to racial trauma including how and when they create micro-aggressions. Skills should be developed for White people to have uncomfortable conversations, especially with family and friends and to learn to speak up when they see situations where racial trauma may occur. White people should become more engaged with their communities, both White and nonwhite. They need to understand that tolerance is not enough and that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color need to feel accepted and safe in integrated settings.

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This Big Conversation deeply appreciates the significant support received from its partner organizations. Calvert Library provided the technical support for the session online. The Community Mediation Centers of Calvert, St. Mary's, and Charles Counties and Baltimore Mediation provided the facilitators for the small group sessions.

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Brought to you by the founder, Middleham and St. Peter's Parish with **The Big Conversation Partners in Dismantling Racism and Privilege in Southern MD** including: All Saints Episcopal Church, Baltimore Mediation, Calvert County Public Schools, Calvert Concept (C4), CalvertHealth, Calvert Interfaith Council, Community Mediation Centers of Calvert, Charles and St. Mary's Counties, College of Southern Maryland, Concerned Black Women of Calvert Co, Emmanuel SDA Church – St. Leonard, Historic Sotterley, Inc., NAACP Branches of Calvert, Charles and St. Mary's Counties, Patuxent Friends (Quaker) Meeting, Piscataway Park / Accokeek Foundation, Public Libraries of Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary's Counties, Remnant Center of Excellence, Inc., St. Mary's College of Maryland, St. Mary's Co. Health Department and St. Mary's Co. Public Schools.