

Take Charge Of Your Health Today. Be Informed. Be Involved.

Racial Trauma



CARLOS T. CARTER

This month, *Take Charge of Your Health Today* is focusing on intergenerational and racial trauma, its impact on the Black community, and ways to help people break the trauma cycle and begin the healing process. We asked Carlos Carter, President and CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, to share his thoughts on how trauma manifests in UL clients and what he believes can help alleviate it.

How do you see race-based trauma affecting the folks you serve?

In this country, race-based trauma is a daily struggle for our clients — and has a clear impact on their health and sense of security. It's played a central role in relegating many of our clients to low-paying jobs, leading to a greater likelihood of poverty and justice-related turmoil for their children.

Through our youth programs, our young people have shared their fears about interacting with police — citing the fates of Eric Garner and George Floyd. This trauma robs them of their freedom, safety, security, and diminishes their quality of life. Isn't this the land of the free?

In our housing department, our Black clients are not able to use Section 8 vouchers in communities that have higher property values and excellent schools — even after the reimbursement rate was raised to accommodate market rent. Our Black clients who are seeking mortgages for the first time have a rejection rate almost 30% higher than comparable white applicants.

In our Family Support Centers, we've witnessed racial trauma impact the mental health of families with few or no resources. These families are more reluctant to reach out for help due to historical and current breaches of trust.

Finally, in our senior workforce development programs, such as the Urban Senior Jobs Program (USJP), our seniors suffer PTSD-like symptoms, such as hopelessness, depression, and anxiety, resulting from decades of racial trauma. Every-day occurrences of injustice and discrimination are often triggers for them.

As you can see, racial trauma is a serious challenge for our clients, and we work hard to connect them to resources. We are committed to removing barriers that impact their ability to realize their full potential and achieve economic self-sufficiency.

We know trauma has the ability to affect families across generations. What advice do you have for parents, guardians, and elders who want to help their families heal?

The first steps are recognition and acknowledgment. We have seen many cases where dysfunctional situations are normalized and familiar. This dysfunction is passed down from generation to generation negatively impacting the quality of life and mental health of our children and families. It impacts how they react to and with one another and others outside their families.

To begin the process of healing, we need to encourage our community to embrace therapy. This can be an opportunity to discover and address the root causes of behavior. More importantly, therapy can be an opportunity to discover the power of healing. We must make mental health a priority in our community and normalize the idea that we all need to heal from something. This "healing" mindset will help families break toxic cycles and rewrite unhealthy narratives that have not allowed our families to thrive. We deserve to be healed and move from barely surviving to thriving!

How are the concepts of identity, ancestry, and art important to the Black community? How can they be used to address trauma?

These concepts are important to the Black community because our identity has been shaped in a big way by the negative impacts of slavery. Those who enslaved us have demeaned and robbed us of our culture and identity. We must realize the negative aspects of our history — exploitation and condemnation — are only part of who we are, not entirely who we are. It's time to reclaim our identity and value. We must shun the lies that we're not good enough! We descend from kings and queens and have been great contributors to this world and culture. We are responsible for making this one of the wealthiest countries in the world through our free labor, blood, sweat, and tears. To find healing, we must rediscover our African Culture and allow this pride and culture to move us to healing. We need to sing, dance, and connect within our community, as our ancestors did before us. We are strong, beautiful, peaceful, intelligent, creative, and worthy of honor and celebration!

Revealing Black trauma can heal Black trauma

Trauma affects everyone in some way, but its impact on Black people's health continues to be profound, under-acknowledged and under-treated. Fortunately, that's changing. Pitt professor Dr. Kyaïen O. Conner, Director of the Center on Race and Social Problems and Associate Dean for Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, is at the forefront of a movement to study, train others, and offer community-based healing through time-honored West African traditions.

Trauma and Black people's health

Trauma is a deep emotional wound that affects Black individuals, communities, and generations. Left untreated, it contributes to health disparities for conditions like diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer, depression, and anxiety.

Passing trauma to children and grandchildren

Dr. Conner studies trauma and its consequences on underserved communities, especially intergenerational (IG) and racial trauma.

Intergenerational trauma is emotional and psychological pain and suffering that's passed from one generation to another. It happens to individuals when they experience child abuse and domestic violence for example. It also happens historically through forces like enslavement, Jim Crow laws, mass lynching, and mass incarceration.

IG trauma shows up in people's behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs — and continues after the original trauma survivor is gone. Dr. Conner explains, "A woman who was physically abused as a child may have a harder time forming and maintaining attachments and relationships with others, which may affect how she parents her children. When her children are adults, they pass this parenting style on to their children and so on."

Black people and communities also continue to experience racial trauma caused by the injustice of discrimination, prejudice, and bias especially in the form of police brutality.

Trauma and where you live

IG and racial trauma intersect where Black people live, learn, and work — and play a part in health inequities. "As Black people, we understand our ancestors were only valuable if they were strong and healthy," explains Dr. Conner.



DR. KYAIEN O. CONNER

"Now, 6 or 7 generations later, that enslavement trauma takes its toll on a Black woman who lives in an underserved, redlined neighborhood.

"This woman doesn't have easy, affordable access to healthcare," Dr. Conner continues. "She doesn't trust healthcare providers. She's been talked down to in clinics. She knows what the healthcare industry has done to Black people historically without their consent."

Intergenerational trauma, Dr. Conner argues, has helped to create the image of the strong Black woman who can deal with things herself and is all things to all people. "This woman — who is indeed strong and capable — decides to skip her mammogram and is later diagnosed with late-stage breast cancer. Trauma from her ancestors has played a role in shortening her lifespan." Hidden vs open racism

In addition to ongoing racial profiling, harassment, and inequities in education, income, and housing, Black people also experience racial trauma from microaggressions and code-switching.

Microaggressions are the subtle, everyday slights that

communicate bias toward historically marginalized groups. Examples of racist microaggressions include being ignored at a store counter because you're Black or being followed at a store to ensure you don't steal something or being mistaken for a service worker. "All of this implies you are suspicious. You are less valued than others. You don't belong," Dr. Conner says.

Code-switching is a stressful survival strategy that takes place when Black people change their speech and behavior in white settings

Microaggressions and code-switching are types of hidden racism that can sometimes be more harmful emotionally than open racism. "When we experience clear racial discrimination, we know who to blame and where to find support," Dr. Conner explains. "But when a white co-worker, tells you 'you're a credit to your race,' you wonder: 'Did she just tell me Black people aren't as intelligent as white people?' The meaning and motivation aren't clear. There's no one to clarify — and you've got to figure it out and decide how to react."

Black trauma training

Part of Dr. Conner's work centers on teaching clinicians and students how to assess, address, and treat Black patients' trauma. Training focuses on identifying implicit bias, teaching cultural competency, and engaging in case studies and simulations.

Dr. Conner's research also shows the value of educating young children and their teachers about hidden racism. "Our instinct is to shield young children from talk about racism, because they're too young to understand," she says. "But

anyone who spends time with young children knows they understand a lot! It's never too young to learn about how to avoid and deal with hurtful words — and to celebrate the beauty of diversity, equity, and inclusion."

Healing trauma and West African culture

While trauma training and education are essential components of more equitable healthcare, there are non-traditional methods that promote healing through ancient ancestral connections.

Dr. Conner is also a professional West African dancer and has studied and published information about the physical and mental health benefits of West African Dance. She sees dance as a universal language of connection. She's experienced and studied how African diaspora history, heritage, and culture advances healing and wellness and empowers Black people and communities.

"Many of us don't have a direct link to where we came from," she says. "But we do know that when our ancestors arrived in this country, they used dance, music, and song to cope with enslavement. Engaging in culturally based programs like The Legacy Arts Project here in Pittsburgh, reveals what was taken from us. That discovery is healing."

Dr. Conner believes that when Black trauma is revealed, people are better able to take a step back from their behavior, understand it, claim it, and process it. "This is how you break the cycle," she states. You don't have to pass along the trauma you've experienced. You and future generations of your family can be free of it."

Legacy Arts Project advances healing, wellness, and wisdom thru Africana arts

Pittsburgh is home to a vibrant organization with a mission to heal, promote wellness, educate, and empower communities. The Legacy Arts Project (LAP) in Homewood achieves this mission by helping people gather and share in Africa Diaspora history, heritage, and cultures.

Founded by Linda "Imani" Barrett, LAP brings together artists from the community to gather and share in expression. The organization uses its space and influence to cultivate a variety of art forms that promote community unity and growth.

LAP's calendar is

packed with events and classes that celebrate and teach elders, children, and everyone in between to dance, drum, sing, and participate in the spoken word, poetry, and visual arts.

For example, LAP's Saturday Institute cultivates and engages youth ages 6-13.

Wednesday community dance class promotes creative movement for adults and youth alike.

Drumming class offers youth 10-years-and-older a journey through Africa with the sounds of the drum.

Movement and Mixing class for mature adults features African

dance, dance choreography, roundtable discussions, and an idea exchange designed to promote mind, body, and spirit wellness.

Classes and programs are minimally priced and open to all members of the community.

Annually during the summer, LAP also hosts Dance Africa Pittsburgh, a weekend arts event that reflects the beauty and shared

gifts of the African Diaspora, including local, regional, and international performance, a meet-and-greet, panel discussion, and African marketplace.

LAP also hosts regular yearly events and activities that honor local Keepers of the Flame. These individuals have made lasting contributions to Pittsburgh and our region through the arts. They reflect the

diversity and beauty of the African Diaspora and inspire others to recognize their own creativity and responsibility to make the world a better place.

For more information — including donating, volunteering, and participating — log on the LAP website at legacyartsproject.org or call 412.607.8375.

THE LEGACY ARTS PROJECT

