

## Audio Transcript

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Guest:	Brittany Hall-Clark, PhD
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Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Welcome to the PTSD Bytes podcast, where we talk to experts about post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health, and how technology like mobile mental health apps can help. This is your host, Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport, clinical psychologist at the Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

In this episode, we will be talking about racial stress and trauma. I'm joined today by Dr. Brittany Hall-Clark, who is a clinical psychologist with the National Center for PTSD's PTSD Consultation Program. She's also an associate professor in the Division of Behavioral Medicine at the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio. Welcome, Dr. Hall-Clark.

Dr. Brittany Hall-Clark:

Thank you so much. I'm honored to be here.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

So let's go ahead and jump right in. What does racial trauma mean?

Dr. Brittany Hall-Clark:

So, racial trauma is a term that can refer to the cumulative impact of racism. And I like to say racial stress and trauma, just to keep in mind that people react in different ways and there's a spectrum. And for some people, racism might create reactions of anxiety or depression, but for some people the symptoms can be things like having reminders come when you don't want them to, avoidance of things that remind you of a racist incident, feeling on guard and having negative thoughts and feelings. And so that can be a distinction between racial trauma compared to racial stress.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And are there ways that racial trauma is different from other types of trauma?

Dr. Brittany Hall-Clark:

I think so. Many times when we're talking about PTSD, we're thinking about disastrous, catastrophic events that might have happened once or over a period of time from the past. For example, combat or childhood sexual trauma or a natural disaster. However, unfortunately, racism is a chronic, ongoing stressor, and it's not "post," it's actively happening. So, I think that can make it more complicated when it comes to healing.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

So, it's a stressor that you can't really get away from.

Dr. Brittany Hall-Clark:

Yes, exactly.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And I imagine that racial stress affects a lot of people. Do we know how common it is?

Dr. Brittany Hall-Clark:

Racism is unfortunately very common. And there are a range of different reactions. Racial trauma is a term that's not formally recognized by the psychological or medical communities in our diagnostic manual, and research is still trying to determine how common it is.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Huh. So if racial stress and trauma isn't even in the diagnostic manual, how does that impact people who have experienced racial stress? I can imagine that that would feel really invalidating to hear that what you're experiencing isn't a diagnosis.

Dr. Brittany Hall-Clark:

Yes, I think that is a great word for it. There's a lot of controversy or lack of recognition about the impact of racism. Sometimes people have the idea that we're in a post-racial society because overt racism isn't as tolerated as it used to be. But we now think about racism as systemic and it can happen in a variety of different ways. So just as you were saying, it can be invalidating to not have formal recognition. But that being said, we have seen an increase in discussion about how to treat racial stress and trauma, and more energy around how to provide help for people that are suffering from it.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Which is really great to hear. But I'm curious, what advice do you have for people who have sought help for racial trauma in the past, but they didn't feel like it was recognized as PTSD?

Dr. Brittany Hall-Clark:

Yeah, I know that can be hard to think about going back to a system that might not have been validating. Being able to have cultural sensitivity when working with people is a core value for many professionals in the mental health field, and is becoming a core value for many organizations. So I think now more than before, people are more familiar with the idea of racial stress and trauma. And if somebody that you're working with doesn't mention it, I think clients can be empowered to voice that this is a significant concern that needs to be considered.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Absolutely. I love the encouragement for people to bring it up, even if your clinician isn't bringing it up, you absolutely can.

Dr. Brittany Hall-Clark:

Yes, exactly.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

So you mentioned earlier that research is ongoing. Are there any challenges to studying racial trauma?

Dr. Brittany Hall-Clark:

Since there isn't that formal diagnostic recognition like we talked about, there's some differences in how people define it. Some people say "racial trauma," some people distinguish between "racial stress" and "trauma." Some people use terms like "race-based psychological injury." So, I think the terminology is a place that can be confusing.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

So we know that racism, and racial stress and trauma, are widespread issues. What does the current research data tell us about the ways in which our communities and society are contributing to the problem?

Dr. Brittany Hall-Clark:

Racism can take more subtle forms that are harder to recognize. That might be through statements or insensitive comments like microaggressions, but there can also be institutional or structural types of racism. So, some examples might be policies that impact groups differently related to segregation or housing or having unequal opportunities. And that can lead to a lot of imbalances when it comes to resources.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And of course, people can be discriminated against for many reasons, including their gender, sexual orientation, age. Is the risk of racial stress higher for those who belong to other groups that have a history of being marginalized?

Dr. Brittany Hall-Clark:

Yes. That concept is often referred to as intersectionality, and it means that the more groups that you belong to that are marginalized, you have a higher risk of exposure to discrimination.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And what about racial trauma among military service members or Veterans? Do you have any advice for providers who work with them?

Dr. Brittany Hall-Clark:

Sure. So military service members or Veterans can experience racism in their personal lives or civilian lives, or in the context of their military experience. So, I think a really important thing is to make space for these experiences when we're talking to service members. Taking time to explore if racism has been a stressor or a factor and how it might contribute to presenting issues.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

I've worked with Veterans who spoke about experiencing racism while they were deployed to war zones. They are getting attacked by people who are supposed to have their back and they couldn't really escape it, and that was hugely challenging for them.

Dr. Brittany Hall-Clark:

Yes, exactly. And it can really evoke a strong sense of hopelessness that the people that are supposed to have your back don't have your back, and make you feel that much more alone.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Absolutely. Well, so that brings me to my next question. So, if someone has experienced racial trauma and they continue to live in a world where racism still exists, how can they recover? Are there effective treatments for racial trauma?

Dr. Brittany Hall-Clark:

Yes. So we're still trying to understand more from a research perspective, but there have been some different approaches talked about. Some of them have been by authors such as Dr. Thema Bryant who talks about different principles connected to racial healing. Involving things like acknowledging the pain of racism, making space to grieve and mourn the loss of innocence, as well as developing empowerment strategies and resistance to overcome racism. There's a new treatment that was created by Dr. Monica Williams called the "Healing Racial Trauma Protocol." And in this therapy, there's a focus on our thoughts and our feelings about racism and how it affects ourselves, our relationships with other people and the world. So in this therapy, people are learning how to balance thoughts that are unhelpful, be able to respond to situations in which they're experiencing racism, and looking for other ways to take care of themselves and empower themselves.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

So for VA patients who may be interested, who should they talk to or what's available?

Dr. Brittany Hall-Clark:

Some VAs offer Race-Based Stress and Trauma Empowerment groups. And there are different VAs across the country that have these groups available. So, you can contact your local VA to find out if your VA has one of them.

In addition, if people are seeking treatment for PTSD, like Cognitive Processing Therapy or Prolonged Exposure Therapy and realize that they've been affected by racism, then it's appropriate to express concerns to your provider and work with your provider to incorporate strategies of healing from racism into treatment.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And what about some other effective ways to cope with racial trauma? Do you have any other suggestions?

Dr. Brittany Hall-Clark:

Yes, I think about two main prongs. One is self-care, so finding ways to take care of ourselves that might be giving ourselves permission to relax or rest. Being mindful of how we're using media; sometimes we can get into "doom scrolling," finding negative story after negative story and being overwhelmed by tragedy. So, working towards media balance and instead looking for more uplifting things or taking a break from screen time. Also connecting with safe others, whether that's family or friends or other loved ones.

There are also empowerment strategies. So this might vary depending on your personality or your values, but for some people that might be being connected to a group that focuses on social justice or advocacy. Or it might be just thinking about the people you talk to day-to-day, and calling out racism when you see it and providing different perspective.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Those are all fantastic suggestions. And of course, this is a technology podcast, are there any tech-based tools that can help?

Dr. Brittany Hall-Clark:

Yes. Dr. Monica Williams has a self-assessment for racial stress and trauma that you can go to. The URL for that is [www.bewellct.com/rts.php](http://www.bewellct.com/rts.php). There are also some providers that have very generously created racial healing care packages, such as Dr. Isha Metzger. So, if you search for her name, Dr. Isha Metzger and Care Package for Racial Healing, that's also a really helpful tool to know about. As part of the National Center for PTSD, we also have different resources related to racial stress and trauma available at About Face, where you can watch videos of service members that are sharing their experiences. whether you're a person of color or a white person.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Those are some great resources and we'll be sure to include the links for all of them in our show notes for this episode. Thank you so much, Dr. Hall-Clark for joining us to speak about such an important topic.

Dr. Brittany Hall-Clark:

Thank you. It's been a pleasure to be here.

Dr. Andrea Jamison:

Hello, this is Dr. Andrea Jamison and I am the executive producer of the PTSD Bytes podcast. Catch new episodes by following or subscribing to PTSD Bytes on your preferred podcast app. Show notes and more information are on [www.ptsd.va.gov/podcast](http://www.ptsd.va.gov/podcast). Thank you for joining us.