

# NO. 10: THE ROLE OF RACIAL TRAUMA AND INTERNALIZED RACIAL OPPRESSION IN MENTAL HEALTH

*Racial trauma is the collective effect of racism on Black, Brown, and Indigenous people’s mental and physical health.*

## Background

SAMHSA defines behavioral health equity as “the right of all individuals, regardless of race [and other related factors], to access high-quality and affordable healthcare services and support.” Two of the most significant drivers of behavioral health inequity are racial trauma and internalized racial oppression. To help you recognize and address inequities in your organization or system, this summary offers key concepts for understanding racial trauma and internalized racial oppression; an overview of internalized racial oppression; insight into the toll of racial trauma on the mental (and physical) health of Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples; and a list of related resources.

## Key Concepts

Table 1: Key Concepts for Understanding Racial Trauma and Internalized Racial Oppression

KEY CONCEPT	DEFINITION
<b>Race</b>	A false classification of humans created by Europeans, using white people as the model of humanity and the height of human achievement for the purpose of establishing and maintaining power and privilege.
<b>Racism</b>	Prejudice against a person or people based on their membership in a particular racial or ethnic group, combined with social and institutional power on the part of the prejudiced person or group. In other words: <b>Racism = racial prejudice + social and institutional power</b>
<u>Racialization</u>	The process of constructing racial meaning, including putting people into racial categories and associating each group with certain objects and ideas.
<u>Internalized Racism</u>	Private beliefs and biases about race that reside inside our own minds and bodies. For white people, this can be internalized privilege and superiority. For people of color, this can be internalized oppression and inferiority.
<u>Interpersonal Racism</u>	Bias, bigotry, and discrimination based on race. Once we bring our private beliefs about race into our interactions with others, we are now in the interpersonal realm.



The NASMHPD - TTI Knowledge Bites webinar series was produced by the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors in 2023. Each webinar is accompanied by a Knowledge Bite summarizing recommendations, community examples, and resources.

KEY CONCEPT	DEFINITION
<b><u>Institutional Racism</u></b>	Unjust policies, practices, procedures, and outcomes that work better for white people than people of color, whether intentional or not.
<b><u>Systemic/ Structural Racism</u></b>	Racial inequities across institutions, policies, social structures, history, and culture. It is the racial inequity that is deeply rooted and embedded in our history and culture and our economic, political, and legal systems.
<b>White Supremacy</b>	A political and socio-economic system in which white people enjoy structural advantages and rights that other racial and ethnic groups do not, at both collective and individual levels.
<b>White Supremacy Culture</b>	The idea (ideology) that white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people are superior to everyone else's ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions.

## An Overview of Internalized Racial Oppression

The concept of race was first introduced by Europeans in the late sixteenth century during the so-called ages of Discovery and Enlightenment, and led to the rise of white dominant (supremacy) culture and the internalization of racial oppression. White people internalize racial oppression as their own racial superiority, while Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples internalize it as racial inferiority. [Table 2](#) provides characteristics of internalized racial superiority and inferiority. Notably, internalized racism varies with one's proximity to whiteness. For example, lighter-skinned individuals are more likely to identify with internalized racial superiority, while darker-skinned individuals are more likely to identify with internalized racial inferiority. Ultimately, these internalized beliefs influence both how individuals interact with each other and how social institutions and systems are designed (and for whom).

Table 2: Characteristics of Internalized Racial Superiority and Inferiority

CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERNALIZED RACIAL SUPERIORITY	CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERNALIZED RACIAL INFERIORITY
Perfectionism, individualism, arrogance, paternalism, control, violence, appropriation, cognitive dissonance, objectivity, intellectualization, and anti-blackness	Colorism, isolation, protectionism, self-doubt, self-hate, rage, shame, denial, assimilation, distancing, hopelessness, apathy, erasure, invisibility, protectionism, and anti-blackness

## The Toll of Racial Trauma on Mental Health

Racial trauma is the collective effect of racism on Black, Brown, and Indigenous people's mental and physical health. It occurs at individual, group, and community levels. Examples of contributing events include hate crimes, workplace discrimination, microaggressions, and systems and institutions that facilitate structural oppression. Racial trauma can result in a variety of mental health conditions (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression) and physical ailments (e.g., hypertension, cardiovascular disease, chronic exhaustion) which are disproportionately experienced by Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities. For example, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), American Indians/Alaska Natives have the [highest age-adjusted suicide rates](#) among all racial groups.

Furthermore, racial trauma is often amplified through intersectional identities and other forms of discrimination such as ageism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and xenophobia. For example, according to the American Psychological Association, [nearly two in five men](#) believe they have been unfairly stopped/searched/threatened by the police.



### Additional Resources

A core aspect of antiracist practice is understanding how racial oppression shows up within ourselves and outside of ourselves. These resources can support this process:

- **Scripps News**  
[Understanding Racial Trauma](#) (video)
- **People's Institute for Survival and Beyond**  
[Anti-Racist Bibliography](#)
- **Racial Equity Tools**  
[RacialEquityTools.org](#)
  - Analysis of Internalized Racism and Oppression Resources
  - Core Concept Resources
  - Internalized Racial Superiority Resources
  - Internalized Racism Inferiority Resources
  - Resources for People of Color