

## Race Based Anxiety

By Michael Likier, PhD. ACT and Deirdre Waters, PsyD

Anxiety can be understood as a cognitive process in which one looks to the future, overestimates the probability of a threat, and underestimates his or her ability to cope if danger does occur. Though rarely acknowledged, anticipating and experiencing racial prejudice also contributes to increases in anxiety and trauma (Carter, 2007; Sawyer, Major, Casad, Townsend & Mendes, 2012). The study of racial microaggressions, which can be defined as subtle, intended or unintended, racism (Sue et al., 2007), is providing us with a greater understanding of race based anxiety.

People of color are subjected to racial microaggressions on a regular basis and its impact can have long term negative health consequences. This experience, perpetrated by social acquaintances, colleagues, and strangers alike, suggests a need for public awareness and mental health community involvement. Successful living in New Jersey requires a certain degree of cognitive fluidity. The challenges of assessing interpersonal situations, coping with daily stressors, and balancing finances in a state with a high cost of living adds to ones level of distress. For people of color these stressors are compounded by the pressures of systemic, cultural, and individual racism.

### What Works?

Traditionally, when we treat anxiety, the first thing we attempt to do is evaluate the probability of the danger occurring. For example, when Dr. Likier is working with a client who is afraid that they will lose their job, what they would do is collaboratively examine the evidence that supports this thought, (e.g., other people have lost their jobs, criticisms received, etc.), and then see if there is evidence to the contrary (e.g., good performance review, no signs of layoff now in the company, etc). If it turns out that the evidence does not fully support the negative thought, they look for more reasonable ways of thinking, e.g., “while there are no guarantees, it looks like my job is safe.”

But what happens when the negative thoughts are true, that your colleague really did just suggest that your Ivy League education may not have occurred without affirmative action while assuring you that she values the importance of it, or yes, you did just get pulled over, again, while pulling into your gated community, and you watch in silence as the officer’s eyes widen as he looks at the address on your license.

With racial microaggressions, we move to the other part of the anxiety equation, boosting our resources to cope. Similar to exposure therapy for social anxiety, i.e., “assertive defense of the self” (Padesky, 1997, p. 1), we do not spend time evaluating whether or not the threat is true. Instead, we focus on how to handle feared threats, and we present threats even greater than the client is imagining and rehearse responses to those.

Finally, whether we are therapists, clients, parents, or concerned citizens, of any racial group, including and perhaps especially Whites, we need to get involved with organizing

for racial justice. For as long as the systemic and cultural inequities exist, we will have to struggle with all that comes with it.

#### Recommendations:

1. Become educated on microaggressions.
  - a. Read *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* by Derald Sue
  - b. Share this knowledge with your support network.
2. Utilize Stress Inoculation techniques for yourself and teach them to your children
  - a. Prepare for what might be encountered
  - b. Accept a degree of cultural paranoia as a healthy stance
  - c. Practice tools that will help you cope successfully and safely with discriminatory situations when they do occur.
3. Resist blaming the victim and self-validate
  - a. Use language to describe the discriminatory event
  - b. Accept accompanying thoughts and feelings
4. Consider the benefits of psychotherapy
5. Utilize your support network
  - a. family
  - b. friends
  - c. religious affiliations
6. Participate in the process of making the invisible visible so we can effectively validate our experiences and handle them more effectively.
7. Attend anti-racism workshops.
8. Organize for racial justice

#### References:

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Bios:

Michael Likier, PhD, ACT is a licensed psychologist specializing in cognitive behavioral therapy and multicultural counseling. He is involved with several initiatives for social justice and a member of NJPA's Diversity Committee.

Deirdre Waters, PsyD is licensed psychologist who provides acceptance based behavioral therapy in her private practice in Manalapan, New Jersey. She is the Co-Chair of NJPA's Diversity Committee and is actively committed to social justice. Dr. Waters maintains consulting privileges at Jersey Shore University Medical Center and Riverview Medical Center and is an adjunct professor at Montclair State University. For more information, please view [www.drdeidrewaters.com](http://www.drdeidrewaters.com).