

## Self-Care and Systemic Injustice

by  
Nikkia Young, PhD  
©2020

*“Clean pain hurts...[but] it enables our bodies to grow through our difficulties, develop nuanced skills and mend our trauma. In this process, the body metabolizes clean pain. The body can then settle; more room for growth is created in its nervous system; and the self becomes freer and more capable.”*

*“Dirty pain is the pain of avoidance, blame, and denial. When people respond from their most wounded parts, become cruel or violent, or physically or emotionally run away, they experience dirty pain. They also create more of it for themselves and others.”*

- Resmaa, Menakem, MSW, LICSW, SEP



### Self-Care and Systemic Injustice

by Nikkia Young, PhD

We often hear encouragement to prioritize self-care and be mindful about the volume, quality and reliability of the news media that we take in. My colleague, Yuka Hachiuma, and I just spoke to this during a virtual evening to better equip parents in our high school community. With all of the tragedy, injustice, resistance and strife in our country (that accompanies the acts of courage, compassion, and justice) exercising good self-care in the service of supporting our individual and collective integrity remains a key priority. However, I often find myself concerned that this message is mis-interpreted to suggest that a path to health may begin with pushing aside a vital involvement with the world and engaging in a self-indulgence that masquerades as self-care.

But, what is the difference between self-care and self-indulgence? What distinguishes providing oneself needed shelter from refusing to care for others?

What can healthy engagement with the world look like in the wake of, to name a few, the under acknowledged targeting of indigenous communities, continued extra-judicial killings of Black Americans like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Steven Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, as well as another wave of heightened anti-Asian and anti-Asian American racism and violence?

*My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Minds* is my favorite professional book from last year. I highly recommend it for folks of any race

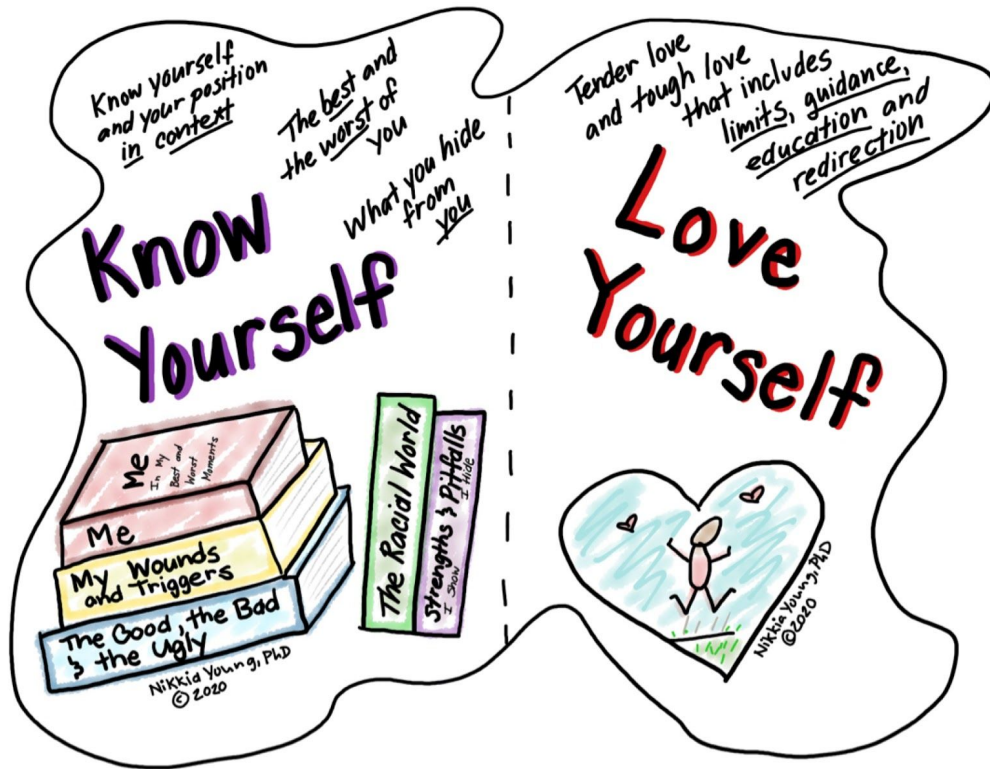
to read for a helpful perspective on American racism and healing, as well as concrete support for how to integrate racial justice with care of our own hearts and bodies.

A few years ago, I created the **Racial Self-Care Checklist**. It's a key component in both [The Art of Giving and Receiving the Gift of Racial Feedback](#), a year-long series that I created and co-led with Tamisha Williams through the California Teacher Development Collaborative. It also featured in [I've "Owned My Privilege"... Now What?](#) a day-long workshop I facilitated for educators and mental health professionals at the NFI Vermont Equity Conference, alongside [Kenneth V. Hardy](#).



The **Racial Self-Care Checklist** is one aspect of the **Resilience** component of one's work to develop the capacity to act with increasing **Racial Integrity** in a society in which racial injustice is "baked in" and affects each of us. The Racial Self-Care Checklist highlights the need for each of us to exercise both **Racial Self-Care** and **Self-Management** across all areas of our lives, including all of our interactions with ourselves and others, within institutions, as well as in

society and community. The following images and descriptions give a highly abbreviated version of the **Racial Self-Care (and Self-Management) Checklist**.



### Know Yourself

None of us is immune to the deep impact of racism, no matter how good or unaffected we wish to be. Be honest with yourself about your best, your worst, your wounds and your triggers. It will help you draw on your strengths and plan ahead for unexplored or unacknowledged areas where you need support, mirroring and racial feedback.

In your racial privilege, look for the gaps between how you like to think of yourself and how you may be experienced by those who don't share your privilege. If racially marginalized, find accurate and racially-affirming mirrors outside of yourself to cultivate an internal self-reflection that is resilient against the negative racial distortions you are subjected to.

Please remember that some of us occupy a historical racial middle ground. We're racially privileged in relation to some racial groups and racially marginalized in relationship to others. If that is the case for you, it's important to understand each of the facets of your racial positioning.

### Love Yourself

It's easier for us to be honest with ourselves when we're kind to ourselves about our wounds, vulnerabilities, failures and limitations. However, self-love isn't the same as self-indulgence or non-reflective self-acceptance. Just like with parenting, limits, guidance and redirection need to

accompany tenderness and acceptance when responding to your “pitfalls” and needed areas for growth and healing.



### Soothe Yourself

Slow down. Settle your body. Get grounded. Stay present.

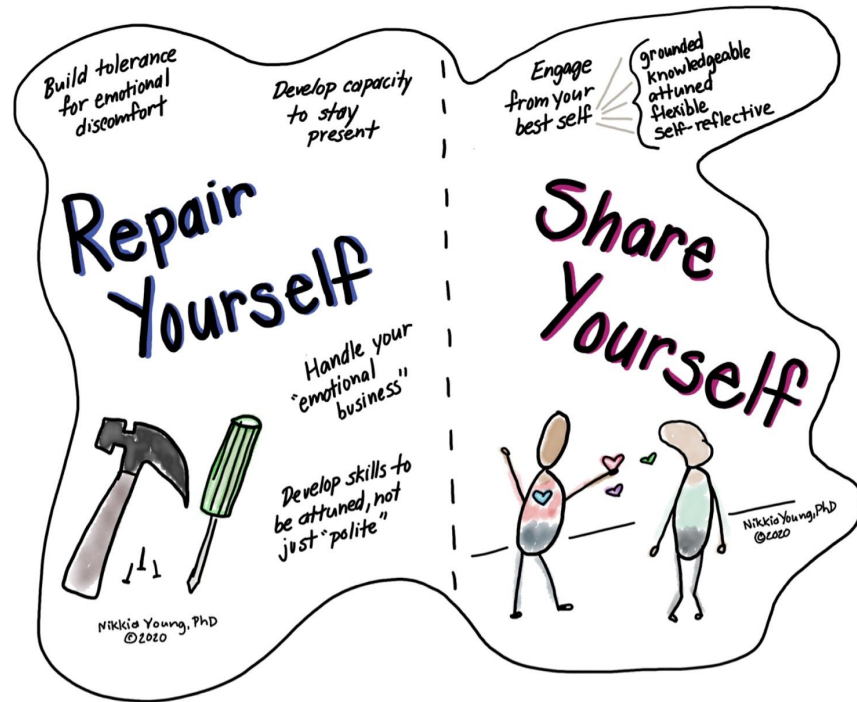
If your racial group is historically privileged, notice ways that you pull for emotional caretaking and take responsibility for soothing yourself. The refusal to emotionally self-regulate in the face of racial stress (and the refusal to build future capacity) has a long history of causing harm to the lives, careers, educations and bodies of Black and non-Black people of color.

If you're from a group that historically has done the emotional caretaking of those with racial privilege, you can focus on soothing yourself and settling your own body, rather than taking care of the feelings and self-image of those with racial privilege. However, if refusing to provide that emotional caretaking puts you in danger, *please* prioritize your safety.

### Move Yourself

Lean into uncertainty and into manageable discomfort—just a little bit. This often means diverging from the racial script and beginning to play a part more in line with racial justice and integrity. This will look like different things for different people.

Then, pause and soothe yourself again. Your capacity will grow over time.



### Repair Yourself

Repair yourself before you share yourself. This will help you engage from your best self.

If you're from a historically racially privileged group, please keep in mind that just because you say something in a "nice" tone of voice does not mean that you've handled your emotional business or that you're engaging in an attuned, collaborative or respectful manner. Make room for curiosity, flexibility, self-reflection and mindfulness before you re-engage. You may also need to do some learning. Being able to respond well right away might be ideal. However, if you do your repair work now, you'll be better equipped to respond appropriately next time.

If you're from a historically marginalized group, remember that it can be okay to prioritize your healing before sharing yourself to support the learning of others. Seeking the support, allyship, care and healing that you need is one small step toward creating a more just world.

### Share Yourself

And, share yourself to repair yourself. With your trusted people, share a little bit of vulnerability and ask for the support and connection that you need.

For the racially privileged, even if it isn't anyone's job to teach you, along with doing your own research, it's your responsibility to cultivate relationships in which you can ask for the help and feedback that you need to be your increasingly best self.

For the racially marginalized, you can consider sharing yourself in a way that centers your own healing. That may involve accepting the request to help someone make sense of their racial privilege, or sharing resources for their learning. It could also involve a renegotiation of what you are and are not available to offer. As long as this happens on terms that are acceptable to you and deepen your integrity, you have my gratitude and that of many who will come after you. You've helped to make the world just a little bit more beautiful.

**Nikkia Young, PhD**

© 2020

