

# Evidence Brief

## Healing Practices for Black & Racialized Youth

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### How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work, and searched in online databases using the following key terms: "healing practices," "healing," "Black youth," and "racialized youth."

### Definitions of Key Terms

There are multiple ways to define the term "healing;" for the purposes of this Evidence Brief, we draw from a definition offered by Roy, Noormohamed, Henderson & Thurston (2015) that refers to healing as "personal and societal recovery from the lasting effects of oppression and systemic racism experienced over generations" (p. 64).

### Three Key Messages

- 1) Researchers and authors writing from a critical perspective frequently argue that **healing should be conceptualized as a collective, rather than an individual, process**. This does not mean that trauma and healing should not be addressed at an individual level as well, but that individual work is ideally embedded in broader structural work (YouthREX, 2018; YouthREX, 2017; Watson, 2015; Ginwright, 2010; Kuwee Kumsa, 2010).
- 2) Professionals interested in healing work with youth may want to **focus on supporting youth to develop/strengthen critical consciousness about the systemic causes of individual hardship** (YouthREX, 2017), and **help them to take action to change these unjust conditions** (Ginwright, 2010; Kuwee Kumsa, 2010). It is important to note that the actions youth take to initiate change may not take the traditional forms that come to mind when we think of 'civic engagement' (e.g. volunteering, campaigning for a politician). Rather, Ginwright (2010) has found examples of youth challenging police harassment or advocating for supplies needed in the classroom. By coming to understand individual adversities as a result of systemic oppression, youth learn not to blame themselves, and by taking constructive action to improve their lives and communities, they may gain a sense of possibility and hope (Herr, 2017; Ginwright, 2010).
- 3) At a minimum, healing practices must be culturally safe for youth; however, ideally, **healing practices can help youth to (re)connect/(re)discover/remember/invent their cultural**

**identities**, including traditions, beliefs, values, and customs (YouthREX, 2017; Roy, Noormohamed, Henderson & Thurston, 2015; Tello & Acosta, 2012; Kuwee Kumsa, 2010). The importance of **rooting healing interventions in culture** lies in the fact that many racialized people have been distanced from their cultural identities and languages, or worse, as in the case of Indigenous people, have experienced cultural genocide, resulting in what Roy, Noormohamed, Henderson & Thurston (2015) term a “depression of spirit” (p. 64). Rebuilding or creating cultural connections can help youth heal and re-gain a sense of dignity and self-respect.

## **Summary of Evidence: Six Promising Practices**

Following the key messages above, we can highlight six promising practices to apply in working with young people:

### **1) Engage in healing-centred organizing.**

Chavez-Diaz & Lee (2015) outline how they conceptualize healing-centred organizing; they state that this type of organizing (activism, civic engagement) **brings youth and adult allies together**, responding to years of social policies that have disproportionately and negatively impacted low-income, racialized youth. Moreover, it places healing – defined as a “process that is inclusive of the mind, body, and spirit and that aims to restore and renew the individual and collective emotional and spiritual well-being” – at the centre of activities to promote social justice (p. 3). They offer four principles that youth workers can use to guide their own healing-centred organizing (p. 5; each of the principles is explained in more detail in their article, and you can find the link in the References at the end of this Evidence Brief):

1. Healing is in response to the needs of the community.
2. Healing is political.
3. Healing and organizing intersect.
4. Healing is found in culture and spirituality.

### **2) Be a witness to youth’s challenges.**

Many youth in a study by Watson (2015) stated that what made their experiences of chronic trauma worse was feeling as though they were having these experiences alone – feeling invisible and unheard. Moreover, other authors stress the importance of acknowledging intergenerational trauma and the impacts that it continues to have on youth today (YouthREX, 2017; Roy, Noormohamed, Henderson & Thurston, 2015; Tello & Acosta, 2012).

### **3) Incorporate critical media literacy.**

In their 2017 article, Baker-Bell, Stanbrough & Everett (2017) describe how critical media literacy “works toward healing the wounds of youth who are affected by racial violence and...provides youth

with opportunities to **investigate, dismantle, and rewrite the damaging narratives** that mainstream media...use to construct and oppress Black youth” (p. 138). The authors insist that teaching Black youth to recognize how the media and other institutions represent them in inaccurate and hurtful ways, as well as how they can respond to these representations, can be healing. They offer sample lesson plans (designed for teachers) that youth workers may adapt to use in their own programming. (You can access the article for more details at the link in the References at the end of this Evidence Brief.)

#### **4) Create spaces for peer support.**

**Spaces for youth to support each other** are key, as they allow youth to feel seen and connected to others who share similar experiences. This may also support the (re)creation of a sense of community or healthy social relationships, which researchers have argued is often damaged/destroyed by an environment in which there is a lot of violence (Watson, 2015).

#### **5) Use Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR).**

Herr (2017) details how YPAR can be used “as healing practices toward activism” (p. 458). She describes her experience of supporting youth of colour to organize a YPAR project that eventually took action to change some of their school’s troubling policies. She notes that the YPAR process can foster critical consciousness and healing in youth when they come to recognize injustice and learn how social change can be brought about through activism.

#### **6) Avoid pathologizing youth’s coping mechanisms by labelling them ‘good’ or ‘bad.’**

Watson’s 2015 study details many ways that youth experiencing violence and poverty in an urban area cope on a daily basis. He contends that rather than calling some coping mechanisms ‘negative’ (e.g. substance use) and others ‘positive’ (e.g. physical activity), it’s helpful to acknowledge that youth’s behaviours are influenced by their contexts and the conditions in which they live. This way, practitioners can avoid further stigmatizing youth who likely already face daily criticism and challenges.

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