

VOICES | **Opinion** *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

I thought I never personally experienced racism. Then I realized I just normalized it.

Recently, I realized that my success comes from my ability, as a Black woman, to normalize and dismiss the racism I face every single day.

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I am a graduate of Harvard Law School; a law professor; a municipal judge; a wife and mother. By any measure, my life is an example of success. But that success has come at a steep price, paid for by denying my pain.

As a Black woman in America, I make the daily decision to either call out and challenge the routine subtle racism I experience — and as a consequence be labeled as angry — or ignore the racial cuts, pretending with a smile that the resulting wound doesn't hurt. This choice is exhausting, yet until recently, it's one I didn't even realize I was making.

This summer, a white colleague recently asked if I had ever personally experienced racism. I instinctively said no. I didn't have any singular life-threatening racial incident, nor been the victim of police abuse. Sure, crosses had been burned in my neighborhood when I was a child in Nashville, but not on my yard. I later found myself inexplicably angry — first at my colleague, and later, at myself.

Why, in that reflexive denial, was I equating the absence of violent racism with the absence of all racist slights directed my way? In a sobering moment, I realized that my success (and that of many people of color) stems from our ability to normalize daily racism. Indeed, our survival as healthy adults depends on it, even if — or perhaps because — it means denying the resultant pain. Like others, I had become a master of wearing a mask.

Children learn racism early

Racism has long been a dangerously regular part of American life. So interwoven in our nation's fabric, its pervasiveness has made it seem normal — hence deniable. The normalization of racism props up a powerful façade of acceptability, even to its victims.

Minimizing the daily abusive reality of people of color is in many ways more corrosive to the ideals of equality, and harder to eliminate, than the violent extremes.

Another generation shouldn't have to fight: *Black males face appalling inequities in America. Why there's a new reason for hope.*

For me, normalizing racism began when I was 7 years old. I cried when my mother told me she would be fired for being late to work, because I thought she meant she would actually be set on fire, just like the house of the other Black family a few blocks away.

A few years later, when I was only a 10 year old playing in my front yard, I was referred to as the N-word. This was the first time but not the last. And, like WNBA superstar A'ja Wilson, I too was "uninvited" from a birthday sleepover in the fourth grade. My friend told me her dad didn't like Black people. I was heartbroken, but I simply smiled to hide the hurt. I learned the painful lesson that I was not her friend, I was her Black friend. I have experienced countless examples of similarly-hurtful treatment.

Beyond mere survival

Witnessing violent racism against other people of color also contributes to the insidious normalization of racism, and is equally traumatic. Whenever my husband and I visit Jasper, Texas, we visit the memorial to his relative, James Byrd Jr., the Black man chained to the back of a pickup truck and dragged to his death in 1998. Byrd's heinous death, plus the vandalism that continues to demean his memorial, inflicts collateral damage on us, our family, and our nation.

Teaching a torrent of blood and tears: *Trump wants to control what kids learn about slavery. That's so wrong in so many ways.*

Have I ever personally experienced racism? Every. Single. Day. I am soul-achingly tired. Tired of denying, minimizing, and dealing with racism. Tired of waking my daughter up from nightmares where she's asking me if the police are going to kill us. Tired of a lifetime of conversations about racism, service on diversity committees, and participation in anti-racism workshops. Tired of being terrified every time my gentle, educated Black husband leaves our house, he will be the victim of police violence.

It is time for me — and others — to take off our masks. For the sake of survival, I would minimize racism and hide its pain. But I can no longer normalize the unacceptable. None of us should. If Americans want to build a society that truly reflects our nation's "self-

evident" truths in our Declaration of Independence, we must all identify racism for what it is, working together to ensure a new normal.

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