

# Psychologist discusses impact of videos of police brutality, recommendations for engaging with them

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

It's been a week since the horrific video of five police officers fatally beating Tyre Nichols, a 29-year-old FedEx worker, was released to the

public. In that time, the officers were fired, charged and arrested for Nichols' murder, nationwide protests took place and Nichols' family held an emotional funeral.

But even as footage of a young Nichols skateboarding went viral and offered a glimpse of a man enjoying life, the video of the brutal beating lingers in the minds of many. Adrianna Crossing, assistant professor of applied psychology and [health sciences](#) at Northeastern University, says it's due to the way these videos can trigger powerful stress and trauma responses, particularly for people of color.

"These are natural responses to feeling like you're in danger, and watching a video where someone else is very clearly in danger—and in many of these videos, the case is they're being killed on screen before us—can trigger an almost vicarious stress response," Crossing says.

As videos of police brutality have become more common with the use of police body cameras, Crossing says it's more important than ever to understand what these videos do to our bodies and minds and how we should—or should not—engage with them.

Although people respond to these kinds of potentially traumatic events differently, Crossing says, every human has a neurological and adrenal stress response that is designed to keep them safe. The hypothalamus and [pituitary gland](#) in the brain and the adrenal glands collectively send signals to the body that it needs to defend itself.

That's where stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline come into play, triggering an elevated heart rate and blood pressure and forcing us into a fight, flight or freeze response. All of this applies even when we're watching videos of other people who are in real danger or experiencing real violence.

For people who have previous trauma from police encounters, police violence or violence in general, it can be even more acute—and it can linger.

"Witnessing that kind of thing, it's just so painful," Crossing says. "It's another human being, and we are really hardwired for empathy—we really are—especially when there is cultural or value kinship with the victim."

For Black people it can manifest as a form of community trauma, Crossing says, where the shared hardships and "racialized intergenerational trauma" of being Black in America can make "it feel so personal when these things happen." As a result, watching these videos can trigger any number of psychological responses too.

"You might have these flashes where you're seeing [an image from the video] and you don't want to be seeing it," Crossing says. "It might show up in your dreams. It might take over your everyday thoughts. ... It might change your behavior. You might start to feel, 'Well, am I safe?' and that's a valid response because Tyre did nothing wrong and lost his life."

Although she acknowledges some people watch these videos as a way of "bearing witness" to the realities of racism in America, Crossing recommends that people, particularly Black people, don't watch these videos. The most important thing to do, she says, is to look after your own physical, mental and emotional well-being.

"Even if you don't watch the video, people are going to be talking about the video, they're going to be talking about the case, they're going to be asking you about it because you're Black, you're going to be on Twitter and you're going to see it," Crossing says. "Perhaps disengage, do things that you love, go on a walk, get a pedicure, get a massage, talk to your

mom, watch your favorite show."

Crossing also strongly advises that children should avoid watching these videos. For children, especially at a young age, seeing these videos might not trigger the same response as it would in an adult.

"For [young kids](#), a lot of things like violence and systemic oppression and murder outside the court system is high level and difficult to explain and grasp," Crossing says. "But for adolescents, I would say it depends on where they are in their own racial identity development and the extent to which the racialized components of this violence are going to hit them."

Just because children shouldn't watch these videos, it doesn't mean parents shouldn't talk about the harsh, violent realities shown in them.

For Black parents, this is nothing new; "the talk" has been a part of Black parenting for generations. The talk is a way for Black parents to teach their children about the reality of living in a society plagued by systemic racism and what to do, and what not to do, when encountering the police.

What the talk looks like has changed as racism has changed in the U.S. It's even changed in the years since videos of police violence, filmed on cellphones or body cameras, have become more common, Crossing says.

"With the first couple videos, it was 'Don't run through strange neighborhoods at night with your hoodie on, don't blast loud music,'" she says. "But then it eventually became, 'Don't sleep in your bed. Don't go on a run.' Then there was a shift from 'We need to keep you safe because people who are taking risks are getting hurt' to 'OK, we have work to do,' and then we see this spike in racial justice movements, antiracism, the uprising in 2020."

And Crossing says these conversations shouldn't be limited to Black families. While some people have said white parents should have their own version of the talk, Crossing, who also runs intergroup dialogue projects, says that first requires an understanding of how racism operates and how it affects people of color, and that requires real, dedicated work on the part of white people.

"It's just not talked about enough that I think there's a real lack of understanding of the realities of [racism] and just how pervasive it is and how many aspects of life it impacts," Crossing says. "That is why the conversations need to happen at home because they're not happening anywhere else. They're not happening at school in the way that they should, and across the country teachers' hands are tied in the ways we had decided we were going to try to teach kids about this stuff in schools."

Whether it starts with an intergroup dialogue, a book like Ibram X. Kendi's "How to Be an Antiracist" or a podcast like "Code Switch," Crossings says there is a wealth of resources, particularly from Black thinkers and thinkers of color, to help [white parents](#) themselves for conversations with their children—and become good allies.

"Simply believing in the cause ain't enough," Crossing says. "Are you donating to causes? Are you talking to your white family members, talking to your white coworkers? ... How are you paying that forward?"

Provided by Northeastern University

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