

The Mental Health Effects of Racism

People are exposed to racism on a **micro-level** and on a **macro-level**.



Micro-level:

Experiencing racism yourself or watching others experience it.

Macro-level:

Experiencing racism through the effects of policies, in the media or through institutions like the justice system, education system, or financial system.

When someone experiences racism, it may cause them to feel:

- Sad, depressed, or have suicidal thoughts
- Anxiety and vigilance, on guard for the next discriminatory experience
- Internalized racism (believing negative messages about people of color) and decreased self-worth
- Pessimistic and hopeless about the possibility of change
- Distress and post-traumatic stress
- Anger
- Lack of energy for planning, thinking, and coping
- Increased likelihood of using alcohol and substances



How Does Racism Impact Our Bodies?

When someone encounters a stressful situation, their body gets ready to respond. Their heart starts racing, blood pressure increases and their breathing speeds up as their body releases stress hormones. It's the natural way that the body prepares to manage stress. But, **when a stressor - like structural racism - never goes away, the body can stay in this heightened state.**



Experiences of racial discrimination can cause racial trauma.

When people encounter racism more often, their symptoms may be more intense.

Someone with racial trauma may:

- Constantly think about and re-experience distressing events
- Have anxiety and hypervigilance
- Suffer from chronic stress
- Experience physical symptoms like headaches or stomachaches
- Have difficulties with memory
- Struggle with sleep or insomnia
- Avoid people and be less willing to take risks

People of color experience multiple barriers in seeking mental health support including:

Less access to affordable & high-quality mental healthcare

Availability of culturally competent providers and/or providers from similar racial/cultural backgrounds.

Underdiagnosis or misdiagnosis of mental health issues

Remember: Mental health impacts physical health.

Experiencing Discrimination is a Stressor to The Body

Over time, the constant stress of racism can have long-term physical health effects like:



- Inflammation
- Higher cortisol levels
- Higher blood pressure
- Increased heart rate
- Decreased immune function

Remember... racial discrimination **isn't** the only form of discrimination.

People of color who **also** experience discrimination based on their gender identity, sexuality, disability status or other identities, are:

more likely to be impacted by its trauma AND less likely to be actively included in efforts to combat structural racism.

Coping with Racism and Racial Trauma

If you're experiencing racism, it is not your responsibility to fight against it or battle the systems that support its structure. But it is important to learn how to cope with its effects. Self-care and self-love can be healing and anti-racist acts.



Find a role model or mentor.

This connection can be a powerful part of coping.



Talk about your experiences.

People who don't acknowledge the racial discrimination they've experienced are often at higher risk for mental health struggles.



Name what you are feeling as you feel it. When your emotions are a reaction to racism, label the connection. It can be empowering and validating.



Remind yourself that taking time to pause can improve your health. Rest is an act of self-care and healing.



Connect with others who understand what you experience and can provide social support. Peer interaction is one of the most effective ways to cope. This connection could be with a friend, family member, or a mental health professional.



Identify your specific triggers (places, people, or situations) and think about how to cope with them. Role-playing how to react may help with anxiety and help you process the trauma.



Consider getting involved in activism and problem-solving. It can help boost your sense of control, confidence and contribution. It can also help connect you to others who can validate and support you.

Racism impacts mental health. If you are struggling, please reach out. You are not alone.

Crisis Text Line: Text GOT5 to 741741
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:
1-800-273-TALK (8255)



Office of Mental Health