

Racism and Mental Health

“Racism is associated with a host of psychological consequences, including depression, anxiety, and other serious, sometimes debilitating conditions, including post-traumatic stress disorder and substance use disorders. Moreover, the stress caused by racism can contribute to the development of cardiovascular and other physical diseases.”

— American Psychological Association

Did You Know?

In July 2020, the Kaiser Family Foundation cited poll results reporting that 7 in 10 Black Americans say that they have experienced discrimination or police mistreatment in their lifetime. Half of the respondents also felt that their life was in danger. Past Kaiser Family Foundation poll results show:

- 35% of Black Americans and 26% of Hispanic Americans report experiencing racial discrimination as compared to 10% of white Americans
- 45% of Black Americans say that they felt that their life was in danger because of their racial or ethnic background while 27% of white Americans reported the same
- 64% of those polled say that racial tension has increased in the US over the past 10 years

Other studies show that from November to March of this past year, negative comments on Twitter referring to Asians increased by approximately 70% as a result of COVID-19.

How does this impact mental health?

Multiple studies have concluded that racism negatively impacts mental health. It can manifest itself in feelings of fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, depression, and helplessness. Recent studies find:

- Approximately 1 in 4 Black Americans will experience an anxiety disorder
- 10.8% of Black Americans will experience Social Anxiety Disorder
- 5.1% of Black Americans experience Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Black Americans are less likely to seek mental health treatment as compared to the general population
- Descendants of Holocaust survivors show a higher prevalence of PTSD, along with other psychiatric conditions
- Native/Indigenous people in America report experiencing serious psychological distress 2.5 times more than the general population over a month's time



Results from the 2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health found only 6.3% of Asian Americans who were age 18 and over received mental health services in 2017, compared with 18.6% of white people.

Racial Trauma

Violence linked to racism and persistent discrimination can result in trauma that has a lasting impact. In addition, more subtle “microaggressions” can also cause stress that can compromise both physical and mental health. The cumulative effect of continual exposure to judgment, racial bias and concern over one’s safety can result in a perpetual state of stress, worry and anxiety.

Writing for the BBC, psychotherapist Lola Jay noted, “The experience of racism – both direct and indirect in the form of micro-aggressions or exposure to racism via the media – can have a devastating effect on the mental health of black people. This effect – known as ‘racial trauma’ – can lead to depression, hypervigilance, chronic stress and fatigue, bodily inflammation and symptoms similar to post traumatic stress disorder.”

Kevin Nadal, who is a psychologist and professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice found that the recent increase in racism directed towards Asian Americans as a result of COVID-19 has left many feeling anxious and vulnerable to experiencing further acts of racism.

(continued)

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Negative stereotypes impact adults and children alike. Children and adolescents can experience the stress associated with racism both directly or indirectly if they live in homes and communities where the impact of discrimination is prevalent. The continual stress can have a profound impact on resilience, self-esteem, and feelings of self-worth.

Daniel Gillison, Jr., the CEO of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) stated in May 2020:

“The effect of racism and racial trauma on mental health is real and cannot be ignored. The disparity in access to mental health care in communities of color cannot be ignored. The inequality and lack of cultural competency in mental health treatment cannot be ignored... While there is much we need to do to address racism in our country, we must not forget the importance of mental health as we do so.”

Resources and Information

- Abdullah, T. & Graham-LoPresti, J. (2017) “The Link Between Experiences of Racism and Stress and Anxiety for Black Americans: A Mindfulness and Acceptance-Based Coping Approach”. [Anxiety.org](https://www.anxiety.org)
- Lewsley, J. (2020) “What are the effects of racism on health and mental health?” [medicalnewstoday.com](https://www.medicalnewstoday.com)
- <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2020/05/racism-pandemic>
- <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-04-asian-americans-mental-health-crisis-coronavirus.html>

For a full list of resources please visit
<https://howardcenter.org/community-education/world-mental-health-day/>

ABOUT HOWARD CENTER

Howard Center has a long and rich history as a trusted provider in the community. With a legacy spanning more than 150 years, we have been providing progressive, compassionate, high-quality care and supports to those in need. Today, we offer an array of exemplary mental health, substance use, and developmental services across the lifespan. As Vermont’s largest social service organization, our 1,600 staff help more than 19,000 people each year in over 60 locations throughout Vermont in collaboration with hundreds of community partners.

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