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Understanding Racial Microaggression and Its Effect on Mental Health

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There is an insidious form of racism and racial discrimination that has been gaining the attention of psychologists and researchers in recent years: racial microaggression.

Racial microaggressions are everyday insults or derogatory messages directed toward minorities and people of color, often from well-intentioned people who believe they've done nothing offensive.[1] Any minority group can experience microaggressions, which may be based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, socioeconomic status, or disability.[2] While a microaggression may seem harmless, a lifetime of microaggressions can be quite devastating to a person's mental health.[3]

“Racism can result in a host of mental health concerns including things like increased anxiety and symptoms of depression,” says Dr. Joy Bradford, a licensed psychologist, speaker, and the host of the mental health podcast, Therapy for Black Girls.

To understand the range of these incidents, it’s important to learn the different forms of microaggressions and how they can play out in everyday life.[4]

Three forms of racial microaggressions:

Microassaults: These conscious, deliberate, and explicit racist attacks—both verbal and nonverbal—are meant to denigrate or hurt the victim. Name-calling, using racial slurs, avoiding and/or discouraging interracial interactions and displaying a swastika are all examples of microassaults.

Microinsults: While often unconscious and much more subtle, a microinsult demeans and belittles the victim through racial slights or comments that seem innocuous but are insulting to a person of color. For example, a person of color being mistaken for a service worker, or a woman clutching her purse when walking past a person of color, with the message being, “You are a criminal.”

Microinvalidations: These comments and behaviors can exclude and invalidate people’s thoughts, feelings, or experiences in life. For instance, asking an Asian American where they are *really* from, implies that they are not from the United States and are therefore a foreigner.

How racial microaggressions impact mental health

Research continues to show that racism and discrimination contribute to poor health among minorities and people of color, resulting in increased rates of depression, prolonged stress and trauma, anxiety, even heart disease and type 2 diabetes.[6-8]

One study examined the racial climate and microaggressions at college campuses and found that African American students experienced more depression, self-doubt, frustration, and isolation that impacted their education as a result.[5]

““The experience of having to question whether something happened to you because of your race or constantly being on edge because your environment is hostile can often leave people feeling invisible, silenced, angry, and resentful,” says Dr. Bradford.

"Additionally, the increased stress related to things like microagressions in the workplace and experiences with discrimination can lead to physical concerns like headaches, high blood pressure, and difficulties with sleep, which of course impact our mood as well.”

How to respond to microaggressions

According to Dr. Bradford, there are ways to cope with racial microaggressions. Here, she provides the following advice for anyone experiencing microaggressions:

Seek support.

“One of the most important ways to manage our mental health in the face of racism is to make sure that we have supportive people to help us in processing our experiences,” says Dr. Bradford. “This can be in the form of

colleagues, a therapist, or family and friends. It’s important to have a space where you can give voice to what’s happening to you.”

Don’t internalize racism.

It can be tempting to want to change something about yourself or your behavior in order to be more accepted, but “it’s important to stay grounded in the fact that you are not the issue, racism is the issue,” adds Dr. Bradford.

Know when it’s time to leave a situation.

Certain situations can and will be challenging, like in the workplace, but it’s important to understand when you need to distance yourself from a toxic situation. “Remaining in a situation where you’re experiencing repeated acts of racism and discrimination can be incredibly taxing and harmful,” says Dr. Bradford. “It’s important to recognize when you’ve hit your limit and need to prioritize yourself.”

How to prevent microaggressive behavior

Preventing racial microaggressions from occurring in the first place begins one person at a time.[2] If you find yourself exhibiting microaggressive behaviors, here's what you should do next:

Examine your beliefs.

Take some time to examine the beliefs you grew up with and ask yourself: Do those beliefs and values still resonate with me? Use this time for self-reflection and assess whether they still ring true for you now, as an adult.

Acknowledge other people’s feelings.

While important to take stock of your own emotions, it’s also our responsibility to acknowledge how others feel by validating the fact that their feelings matter. As you go about your day, practice being more mindful about how what you say and do might affect those around you.

Embrace empathy.

Put yourself in other people’s shoes. Ask yourself how you would feel if you were in their situation. By exploring another person’s perspective, you can glean insight into your behaviors. Just as your experience and feelings are true for you, their experience and feelings are true for them.

Try not to get defensive.

If you’ve been called out for doing or saying something hurtful, resist getting defensive. Instead, embrace curiosity and ask questions that can help you understand a person’s point of view. Try not to downplay the situation, and listen carefully as they share their experience. Remember, they are taking a risk and being vulnerable by sharing this information with you.

We all have a role to play in responding to and preventing microaggressions. By taking the time to learn, ask questions, and be accountable for our actions, real progress against racism, in all its forms, can be made.

For more information on Dr. Joy Bradford and her work with Therapy for Black Girls, click here.

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