

How racism enacts a heavy toll on mental health

Point blank, racism affects our brains — and our mental health.

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A woman looks at a mural on the wall of Cup Foods during a vigil for George Floyd in 2022 in Minneapolis. After Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer, "workplaces, governments, and institutions all promised to do better by Black folks through diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) initiatives," writes Shellene Drakes-Tull. "Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, the interest was short-lived."

Stephen Maturen

Black people globally were "*shook*" when we saw George Floyd murdered by the police. We weren't unnerved because this was the first unarmed Black person to be killed, we've known of many over the years. Our collective mental health was worsened by the nine-minute video of this man begging for his life and dying on camera.

After that, workplaces, governments, and institutions all promised to do better by Black folks through diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) initiatives. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, the interest was short-lived.

Fast-forward to January 2024 and most of those promises have fallen by the wayside. DEIB is under attack by some of the most powerful people on the globe. From Elon Musk musing eugenics to billionaire Bill Ackman and the rabid right pushing Claudine Gay, Harvard's first Black female president, out due to accusations of plagiarism. (Ackman's wife, Neri Oxman, was recently accused of plagiarizing parts of her thesis. Ackman asked people to view Oxman's plagiarism as "honest mistakes.")

Last year, a Toronto-area DEI consultant, a Black woman, was blamed for causing the death of a TDSB principal. Those who despise the idea of equity demanded the end of DEIB and with the belief that these conversations were harmful.

The discussions of privilege, white supremacy, discrimination, bias, and anti-Blackness are not easy ones to have, nor should they be. They are meant to ask the hard questions and make people uncomfortable as they reflect on their positions in the world. So, the question is who will we harm, or who *have* we harmed, when we don't have these conversations?

Or when we decide that DEIB is unnecessary?

Currently, the federal government is facing a class-action lawsuit. Black public servants are accusing the government of systematically ignoring them for jobs and promotions since the 1970s.

Fifty years' worth of accusations. Half a century of harm.

Ironically, a report from the Canadian government, Social determinants and inequities in health for Black Canadians: A Snapshot, stated that “Black Canadians continue to face overt and covert interpersonal racism in the workplace, affecting recognition for achievements, access to opportunities for career advancement, and job stability.”

The report found Black men of working age were overrepresented “by a margin of 2.6 to 1 (6.8 per cent vs. 2.6 per cent) in jobs for which they are overqualified (i.e., they are university graduates working in a job requiring high school education or less) as compared to white men.”

Same thing for Black women, who “worked in jobs for which they are overqualified 1.5 times as often as white women (5.9 per cent vs. 3.9 per cent).”

As many of our Black parents said, “You have to work twice as hard to get half as far.”

But how does this affect our mental health?

On Wednesday, people across Canada are going to be discussing mental health for the 13th Bell Let's Talk day. There will be conversations on and offline about mental health and removing stigma. But let's be more nuanced — let's talk about how racism affects the mental health of Black Canadians. The Black Health Alliance found that “racism can cause frequent stress on the body and trigger stress-coping behaviours (e.g. smoking) that often lead to disease.”

National Library of Medicine researchers found that racism can increase anxiety, hypersensitivity to pain, depression, greater inflammatory disease risk, vulnerability to infection, speed up aging and lead to early death.

Point blank, racism affects our brains — and our mental health. “This is not an effect of race,” said Nathaniel Harnett, neuroscientist at McLean Hospital and an assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School to The Washington Post. “It is an effect of the burdens we place on racial groups.”

Racism is harming Black communities, from our children and young people to adults and elders. Today, when you're sharing a post online or tuning into a program that is about mental health, remember that Black mental health matters too.



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