

Everyday discrimination impacts mental health

September 15 2014

Researchers have determined that African Americans and Caribbean blacks who experience discrimination of multiple types are at substantially greater risk for a variety of mental disorders including anxiety, depression and substance abuse.

The research—co-authored by professor Christopher Salas-Wright at The University of Texas at Austin's School of Social Work and published in the August 2014 edition of *Addictive Behaviors*—suggests that experiences of [discrimination](#) in the form of disrespect and condescension do not alone appear to increase risk for most [mental disorders](#). However, hostile and character-based discrimination in combination with disrespect and condescension does seem to place African American and Caribbean black adults at considerable risk for [mental health](#) problems.

"When it comes to mental health, our results suggest that the type and frequency of discrimination matters," Salas-Wright said. "It seems that it is the ongoing experience of multiple types of discrimination, including disrespect, condescension, hostile and character-based discrimination, which negatively impacts mental health."

The study was co-authored with Trenette Clark (lead author) from the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Michael G. Vaughn of the College for Public Health and Social Justice at Saint Louis University; and Keith E. Whitfield of the Center for Biobehavioral Health Disparities Research at Duke University.

"Perceived discrimination is an often overlooked but major source of health-related stress, with effects comparable to other major stressors such as the death of a loved one or the loss of a job," Clark said. "Our study shows that the risk for mental health and behavioral disorders varies according to the types and frequency of discriminatory experiences."

Researchers used data from the National Survey of American Life, a comprehensive survey of the mental health of black and non-Hispanic white populations in the United States funded by the National Institute of Mental Health. Findings are based on a nationally representative sample of 4,462 African American and Caribbean black respondents between 18 and 65 years of age.

The study measured the frequency of perceived discrimination of different types through questions such as "How often do you receive poorer service than others at restaurants or stores?" (disrespectful discrimination), "How often do people act as if they're better than you are" (condescending discrimination), "How often are you viewed as dishonest?" (character-based discrimination), and "How often are you threatened or harassed?" (hostile discrimination).

The vast majority of respondents (83%) reported having experienced some type of discrimination during the past year. Half of respondents (50%) reported recurrent experiences of discrimination of all types, and approximately one-seventh (14.7%) reported frequent experiences of discrimination of all types. Members of these last two groups were significantly more likely to report symptoms for major depressive disorder, and for alcohol-use and illicit drug-use disorders.

"Although most of our sample reported recent discrimination, most did not report mental health and substance use disorders, which speaks to their strength and resilience," Clark noted. "Factors such as ethnic

identity, spirituality and religiosity have been found to help protect against risk factors such as everyday discrimination."

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

Citation: Everyday discrimination impacts mental health (2014, September 15) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-09-everyday-discrimination-impacts-mental-health.html>

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