

Helping African-American young adults cope with the consequences of discrimination

June 1 2016, by Matt Shipman



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Be proud of being Black, take care of your mental health, and find constructive ways to confront institutional racism. That's the advice that a team of psychology researchers has for young African-American adults who are dealing with the consequences of racial discrimination – and tips they want to share with psychologists, counselors and health care

professionals who work with young African-Americans.

Racial discrimination has very real, immediate effects on those who are discriminated against – from elevated blood pressure to an increased risk of [suicidal thoughts](#).

"It's important to be aware of these responses to [racial discrimination](#), especially for those who work with emerging adults – because these young people are going through a critical period of development and are particularly vulnerable," says Elan Hope, an assistant professor of psychology at NC State University who studies the psychology of race, adolescence and identity.

"We want to reach professionals who may be working with emerging adults and could make use of this information, such as school and clinical psychologists, doctors and nurses, social workers, marriage and family therapists, and guidance counselors," Hope says.

"If these professionals have a better understanding of the consequences of discrimination, they will be better able to serve their patients or clients by attending to the unique challenges those clients face due to their race," Hope says. Emerging adults are generally defined as people between the ages of 18 and 29 who are making the transition from adolescence to independent adulthood.

Hope is part of a team, including Lori Hoggard of UNC-Chapel Hill and Alvin Thomas of Palo Alto University, which published [an overview of the research](#) on the consequences of racism late last year. The researchers, working with the American Psychological Association, have now made a less technical version of the article available in the June issue of APA's Monitor on Psychology – including guidance on how to help individuals cope with their experiences of discrimination.

The new article, "Becoming an adult in the face of racism," is available online, and can also be used by psychologists to obtain continuing education credit.

"While the Monitor article is written for practicing psychologists, we think it will be accessible – and useful – for people in a wide variety of professions," Hope says.

The work looks at three types of consequences resulting from racial discrimination:

- Physiological: including elevated heart rate and [blood pressure](#) and disruption of the "hypothalamic pituitary-adrenal axis," which helps the body regulate its response to stress;
- Psychological: including increased risk of depression, suicidal thoughts, stress disorders and behaviors such as substance abuse; and
- Sociopolitical: engaging in volunteerism or political activism may be useful coping mechanisms that help people feel a sense of "agency" or self-determination.

The researchers also lay out several recommendations for helping African-American emerging adults cope effectively with the stress of racial discrimination.

For example, professionals should encourage emerging adults to embrace their race and be proud of who they are.

"In the words of James Brown, '[I'm Black and I'm Proud](#),'" Hope says.

In addition, the researchers note that it's important for professionals in intervention and [mental health](#) practice to take race into consideration when working with patients.

"For example, if a young African-American is presenting symptoms of anxiety, experiences with racial discrimination may be a significant contributing factor," Hope says.

Lastly, the researchers encourage professionals to address institutional racism.

"Ideally, professionals will help their clients confront institutional racism in a healthy way, as well as actively addressing institutional racism themselves," Hope says.

More information: Becoming an adult in the face of racism:
www.apa.org/monitor/2016/06/ce-corner.aspx

Elan C. Hope et al. Emerging into adulthood in the face of racial discrimination: Physiological, psychological, and sociopolitical consequences for african american youth., *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* (2015). [DOI: 10.1037/tps0000041](https://doi.org/10.1037/tps0000041)

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