

Researchers find Black youth are paying an emotional toll due to racism

June 12 2024, by Leigh Hataway



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A new study from the University of Georgia suggests some Black youth are internalizing racial discrimination, which may increase their rates of depression and anxiety.

The analysis is part of a national study that followed over 1,500 Black American adolescents for three years. UGA researchers analyzed survey responses and brain imaging data to assess how the part of the brain that detects threats and regulates emotions, known as the amygdala, reacts under conditions simulating the experience of [racial discrimination](#).

[Published](#) by *JAMA Network Open*, the study found that, for many of the participants, the amygdala essentially shuts down when faced with these negative images.

That deactivation of the amygdala causes some individuals to essentially internalize stressors rather than acting out. Bottling up those feelings comes at a steep price, according to the researchers. These participants reported higher levels of depression and anxiety than their peers.

Participants with high levels of activity in the amygdala during the experiment showed increased levels of problem behaviors, such as exhibiting anger or acting out.

"These children's brains are trying to protect them," said Assaf Oshri, lead author of the study and an associate professor in UGA's College of Family and Consumer Sciences. "Behaviorally, some of these children may not be showing the negative effects of racial discrimination by acting out. But that doesn't mean they're OK. There is an emotional toll to this type of coping mechanism."

Some teens act out because of racism, others develop depression

During the surveys, participants were asked questions about their experiences with feeling mistreated or unaccepted because of their race.

They were asked about their mental state, for example whether they felt fearful or anxious or if they experienced feelings of sadness or depression. Additionally, the survey asked about participants' behavior, such as whether they considered themselves argumentative or thought they had a hot temper.

The researchers also analyzed brain imaging data that showed the response of participants' amygdala during negative and neutral emotional stimulation.

The study found that when this region of the brain was deactivated, participants were more likely to internalize their stressors but unlikely to manifest outward signs of stress.

This deactivation may be indicative of emotional avoidance, according to the researchers. While avoidance is a common approach to managing conflict and stress, the suppression of those feelings may increase the risk of emotional problems.

"This important study gives nuance in thinking about how Black youth can heal from the societal ills of racism and racial injustice," said Sierra Carter, co-author of the study and an associate professor at Georgia State University.

"It not only validates the often-necessary biological protective processes that Black youth may use to combat the stress of racism but the toll this can have on mind-body wellness.

"This study can provide a lens for clinicians and other providers to consider the benefits in substantially investing in safe and validating communal spaces for Black youth to express their emotions related to racism that are divested from systems of continuous oppression."

Stress from racism negatively impacts mental and physical health

Internalizing stressors, like those caused by racial discrimination, poverty or community violence, doesn't just wreak havoc on emotions.

Previous research from UGA's Center for Family Research showed that African American youth who experience frequent discrimination during adolescence are at higher risk of developing heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes and stroke.

And Oshri's earlier studies suggest that while low levels of stress can be beneficial, high levels of chronic stress can become toxic, increasing inflammation in the body that can lead to myriad health problems.

"The present study shows that individuals deal with stressors in different ways, none of which are inherently good or bad," said Oshri, who is based in UGA's Department of Human Development and Family Science. "But for youth who internalize their emotions, it's important to support them through managing those feelings."

"Some youth may need to process it more, and others may need to process it less," Oshri said. "Studies show when parents teach their children to be proud of being Black, it can guard against some of the harmful effects of racism.

"Our study suggests that for kids experiencing depression, it may be more useful to talk about these painful experiences. For other kids, it will be important to acknowledge their feelings while also focusing on proactive coping strategies to reach their goals."

Co-authors of the study include Ava Reck, a doctoral student in UGA's

Department of Human Development and Family Science; Charles Geier, Gene Brody and Steven Kogan, professors in UGA's College of Family and Consumer Sciences; and Lawrence Sweet, a professor in UGA's Franklin College of Arts and Sciences. Additional co-authors include Lucina Uddin, of the University of California, Los Angeles.

More information: Assaf Oshri et al, Racial Discrimination and Risk for Internalizing and Externalizing Symptoms Among Black Youths, *JAMA Network Open* (2024). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.16491](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.16491)

Provided by University of Georgia

Citation: Researchers find Black youth are paying an emotional toll due to racism (2024, June 12) retrieved 21 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-06-black-youth-paying-emotional-toll.html>

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