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Hiding emotions may exacerbate depression among black men who confront racial discrimination

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Enduring subtle, insidious acts of racial discrimination is enough to depress anyone, but African-American men who believe that they should respond to stress with stoicism and emotional control experience more depression symptoms, according to new findings from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The study, "Taking It Like a Man: Masculine Role Norms as Moderators of the Racial Discrimination–Depressive Symptoms Association Among African-American Men," was published online March 8, 2012, in the *American Journal of Public Health*.

"We know that traditional role expectations are that men will restrict their emotions – or 'take stress like a man,'" said study author Wizdom Powell Hammond, Ph.D., assistant professor of health behavior in UNC's Gillings School of Global Public Health. "However, the more tightly some men cling to these traditional role norms, the more likely they are to be depressed.

"It also is clear that adherence to traditional role norms is not always harmful to men," Hammond said. "But we don't know a lot about how these norms shape how African-American men confront stressors, especially those that are race-related."

Hammond studied the phenomenon researchers call everyday racism,

which is marked not so much by magnitude or how egregious the prejudice and torment were, but by persistence and subtlety.

"It chips away at people's sense of humanity and very likely at their hope and optimism," Hammond said. "We know these daily hassles have consequences for men's mental health, but we don't know why some men experience depression while others do not."

Hammond studied data collected from surveys of 674 African-American men, aged 18 and older, carried out at barber shops in four U.S. regions between 2003 and 2010.

She found that everyday racial discrimination was associated with depression across all age groups. Younger men (aged under 40) were more depressed, experienced more discrimination and had a stronger allegiance to norms encouraging them to restrict their emotions than men over 40 years old. Furthermore, some men who embraced norms encouraging more self-reliance reported less depression.

The results showed associations, not necessarily causation, Hammond noted.

The data also showed that when men felt strongly about the need to shut down their emotions, then the negative effect of discrimination on their mental health was amplified. The association was particularly apparent for men aged 30 years and older.

"It seems as though there may be a cumulative burden or long-term consequences of suffering such persistent discriminatory slights and hassles in silence," Hammond said. "Our next task is to determine when embracing traditional role norms are harmful or helpful to African American men's mental health."

The information will help target future interventions to subgroups of men, rather than try to reach all men with one general approach.

"African-American men are not all alike, just as all people in any group are not alike," Hammond said. "The way they feel, respond and react changes over time as they normally develop. The slings and arrows of everyday racism still exist, and we need to find targeted ways to help men defend against them while also working to address the policy structures that project them."

More information: The study is available at ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/ … 105/ajph.2011.300485

Provided by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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