

## How and why racism can impact on black people's psychology

This issue of racism and its impact is complex as it can have wide ranging consequences. It can have an effect on the way we look at ourselves, the relationship we have with our partners, family, friends and the world at large.

Racism is defined as, "prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one's own race is superior."<sup>1</sup> Politically, the practice of racism is specifically viewed as having the power to act on ones prejudices, meaning having the power to act out prejudice in the form of institutional and structural racism. This is why as a social group black people in the diaspora do not have the capacity to be racist as we do not have the privilege or power to oppress.

Racism and its influence is an issue that requires our attention because it can affect our health, wellbeing and overall quality of life. It is even more critical we take a closer look at this now as the number of black people living in the European Union is growing in number year on year. As a result of this more black people are likely to experience racism of some kind and its ill effects. Therefore having a greater understanding of how and why racism impacts black people's psychology can gives us an opportunity to develop strategies to protect ourselves first and foremost. Thereafter black people can think of broader social and political actions that can be taken to combat it effects and the practice of racism.

To help put this into context a study was put together to examine the widespread racism black people are experiencing across Europe. A survey conducted last year by the EU's agency of fundamental rights (FRA) called Being Black in the EU<sup>2</sup> revealed the results of a survey of roughly 6,000 people of African descent in 12 EU Member States:

"Racial discrimination and harassment are commonplace. Experiences with racist violence vary greatly across countries, but reach as high as 14%. Discriminatory profiling by the police, too, is a common reality."

"One quarter of the respondents felt discriminated against during their job search. Finding suitable work is another challenge: the mismatch between individuals' educational levels and their current jobs is striking. Access to housing can also be difficult, both in the private and public sectors."

"A particularly unsettling pattern is that younger individuals tend to experience more discrimination and exclusion than older individuals."

This is obviously a small sample of the lived experience of the millions of black people that live in the EU, nevertheless many black people can identify, directly or indirectly with the results of widespread discrimination and exclusion as articulated by participants in the survey.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/racism>

<sup>2</sup> [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2018-being-black-in-the-eu\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2018-being-black-in-the-eu_en.pdf)

*What does this look like for black people in countries such as Belgium?*

An article by Politico.EU, reveals some of the findings from a the United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent report, “Belgians of African descent are more educated than the country’s average population — about a third of all Belgians are educated to degree level, while some 60 percent of Afro-Belgians are four times more likely to be unemployed”. The working group also stated that racist discrimination is “endemic” in Belgian institutions.

*So now the question is, what is the impact of the systemic and everyday experiences of racism that these days are often referred to as micro and macro aggressions?*

Racism for the most part is a psychological assault on our sense of self, crushing our validity as human beings and not to mention the physical violence some experience. Both forms of assaults may lead to varying degrees of emotional and psychological wounds that are upsetting, distressing and for some results in trauma. How we think and feel about ourselves is thus brought into question along with the wider sense of belonging.

Psychologically the impact on black people can be very profound through the emotions that are stimulated such as anger, sadness, resentment, powerlessness and hopelessness. One of the significant effects of racism is the chronic stress experienced due to the micro and macro aggressions in the form of disrespect, insults and other form of subtle or explicit attacks. Although the terms have recently gained popularity, the term micro aggression in particular goes back to 1970, where professor Chester M. Pierce of Harvard University first coined it to describe everyday slights and insults which he repeatedly witnessed non-black Americans inflicting on African Americans. This compares to macroaggressions which are more obvious and blatant acts that are harmful on an individual level.

Advancements in knowledge have helped in the understanding that stress causes all sorts of physical and mental health issues. The ramifications of stress and unresolved trauma are often numerous affecting thinking, emotions, body and behaviour. This can develop in to symptoms like, mood swings, fear, guilt, self-blame, withdrawal from relationships and feeling hopeless. These feelings can manifest in people having trouble functioning at home or as well as work. Below are a handful of examples of how it can affect us in specific ways:

- **Our thinking** - Struggling to make simple decisions or concentrate.
- **Our emotions** - Increased feelings of anxiety and worry or feeling close to tears.
- **Our body** - Feeling tired most of the time; more frequent cases of colds and other infections; upset stomach; sleeping badly and high blood pressure.
- **Our behaviour** - We may become irritable, short tempered or even passive; comfort eating to relieve anxious feelings or experience loss of appetite; take more time off work; drink too much alcohol or coffee to feel better.
- **Relationships** - Unable to form close or satisfying relationships, feeling emotionally numb and disconnected from others.

In our everyday lives the stress of racism and discrimination can lead to mental health difficulties such as anxiety and depression, which if prolonged can result in mental illness. Immigrants in general are at greater risk of developing a mental illness, however research shows, *“the risk is doubled in black migrants to white countries, and the risk is increased again in their children. It seems that it is not about migration alone or being black - it is about being black in a white country. The rate of serious mental illness in the Caribbean and in Africa is not high...”*<sup>3</sup>

Understandably the focus on racism is often on the explicit eye catching headlines, which tend to grab the expressions of discrimination and racism. Moreover, another aspect of the experiences black people have to contend with is the stress created by the frustrated opportunity to maximise their capability whatever their social or professional interest. The potential of black people can be frustrated in a number of ways, be it discrimination in the form of discrimination in the workplace and the negative impact on recruitment, pay and promotions. Even when black people possess comparable or better qualifications. Then there can be other frustrations such as treatment within the education system or accessing finance for business ventures. In all, the behaviour of mainstream society can leave black people feeling like second-class citizens due to not being treated equally and fairly despite adhering to all the standards of the society. To add insult to injury, having been denied opportunities to maximise their potential there is often the negative stereotypes to contend with such as being labelled as criminals and lazy.

As mentioned previously, racism and discrimination can be taken on as a personal attack resulting in different types of physical, mental and emotional wounds. Further leading to psychological trauma due to ongoing stress or from a one off event such as exposure to violence. This can have a deep psychological effect on black people. It can lead to questions of self-worth as for many, it shows a lack of respect or value in terms of being treated in a dehumanising way. Being handled with less courtesy or receiving a substandard service based on race, can also leave black people feeling “not good enough” and inferior. It can lead to self-judgement and people feeling ashamed of themselves or associating negative elements with being black. Our self-esteem and self-worth can be very much tied in with how people see and treat us. If you live in a society where the constant message being received is that you are “less than” it’s very hard not to start taking it on board and believing or reacting to it on some level.

*The question then becomes how people make sense of the everyday experiences of racism?*

What do black people do with the emotions and feelings they can’t express because they feel they won’t be listened to or even worse believed? Many have come to expect no action will be taken and justice received due to a lack of trust in various social institutions like the local governments, police, judiciary and governmental bodies.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/apr/02/comment.health>

Being subjected to a steady stream of racism, be it causal or blatant, it's important that black people find healthy ways of expressing their emotions and feelings these experiences generate. Connecting and talking to loved ones, family and friends is a good starting point. Next some people may want to become socially and politically active in order to make a change. On a more personal level another avenue to take may require stepping out the comfort zone by working on healing from the distress or trauma the experience generated.

Frantz Fanon, the famous French Caribbean psychiatrist, is said to express the sentiment in his work that black people cannot help but be influenced by the manifestation of racism. How black people consciously response to the presence of racism though is how we can control how it defines us. This is essential in order that the pain and suffering experienced does not spoil ones quality of life and relationships with others. Moreover, that it does not get passed onto the next generation in the form of unhealthy attitudes and behaviours about oneself, others and the world. This is to ensure the hurt black people experience as result of racism is not unfairly taken out oneself or loved ones. For this not happen, those affected have to do the work of healing from their emotional wounds before they can educate others and change attitudes.